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## Crook County ranchers worry about proposed mountain bike trails

Forest Service proposal calls for 52 miles of trail in Ochoco National Forest

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI Capital Press

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Rancher Shelley Santucci discusses her concerns with the proposed Lemon Gulch Trail Project in the Ochoco National Forest, which critics fear will conflict with grazing cattle.

Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

**PRINEVILLE —** Grazing cattle and speeding mountain bikes don't seem compatible to rancher Shelley Santucci.

For that reason, Santucci grew alarmed earlier this year when the U.S. Forest Service floated the idea of constructing a 52-mile system of mountain bike trails largely on her grazing allotment near Prineville.

“It’s not just a bike trail, it’s a bike highway,” Santucci said of the proposal.

The possibility of a mountain bike crashing into a cow at high speed doesn’t seem safe to Santucci, who also worries who’d be held liable for such an accident.

Forest Service employees and mountain biking enthusiasts have not heard of any collisions between cyclists and cattle, they said, and they want to work with the ranchers to alleviate concerns.

Aside from the immediate threat of collisions, Santucci is concerned that the presence of mountain bikers will drive her cattle from the uplands into areas near water.

Santucci’s grazing allotment, which her family’s held for 33 years, is regularly monitored for disturbances to waterways. Violations could mean losing the grazing permit.

“It’s tough enough to keep them in the uplands as it is, because cattle by their nature are roamers,” she said.

Other neighbors of the proposed [Lemon Gulch Trail System Project](#) also worry about the heightened risk of fire from more visitors.

The project would entail building three trailheads for up to 40 cars apiece, which critics fear would invite around 100 vehicles a day and greatly worsen traffic on the gravel road leading to the site in the Ochoco National Forest.

These problems, as well as a potential culture clash between rural residents and urban mountain bikers, aren't worth any economic boost from tourism — which would likely be nominal, said rancher Don Vogel.

“They might stop by a brewery in town and eat a hamburger and drink a beer, but it's not going to bring much money to this community,” Vogel said.

Though the proposal was officially announced under a “scoping notice” in March, the concept has been fermenting for about three years. Critics feel it's now largely a *fait accompli* whose planning they were excluded from.

“The Forest Service has a legal obligation to contact adjacent landowners and affected permittees. None of them were contacted,” said Ann Dill, a neighboring rancher.

Critics of the proposal are trying to muster political opposition to the project at the county, state and federal levels, with the goal of having the trail system built somewhere else.

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“We’re not necessarily opposed to it. We’re opposed to it at the location proposed,” Vogel said. “We’ve asked them to go back to the beginning, to start the process over.”

Due to the concerns raised by critics, the Forest Service is hitting “pause” on the proposal, but it doesn’t plan to choose another site for the trail system, said Kassidy Kern, public affairs officer for the agency.

“We definitely pumped the brakes,” she said.

The trail system would predominantly be located within the 50,000-acre Mill Creek Allotment. About 6% of that area — 3,000 acres — would be affected by the proposal, the agency said.

Santucci’s permit allows her to release 340 head of cattle onto the allotment.

The Forest Service is looking into reports of collisions between bikes and cattle on other trails but so far haven’t found any, said Beth Peer, environmental coordinator with the agency.

The agency will be “managing public expectations” so that bikers are aware of cattle and manure on the trails. The agency will also rely on a “phased approach” so that there’s “time for monitoring and assessing” the project’s impacts, Peer said.

“Mountain biking is a valid use of public land, as is grazing,” Kern said. “How do we balance those benefits? That’s what we’re working on right now.”

As for complaints about the planning process, the Forest Service said it’s only taken an active role this year after receiving a submission from the Ochoco Trails Strategy Group.

That “collaborative” group is aimed at resolving conflicts between recreational uses of public lands, such as those between mountain bikes and horses, Kern said. “They’re trying to deconflict themselves before they come to the Forest Service.”

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The agency began notifying landowners and started the scoping process once it had taken up the strategy group's concept, she said. "When they brought us the project proposal, that's when our wheels began to kick into motion."

It's already common for mountain bikes to share trails with cattle, so it should be possible to resolve the concerns of the project's critics, said Travis Holman, who represented the Central Oregon Trail Alliance in developing the strategy group's proposal.

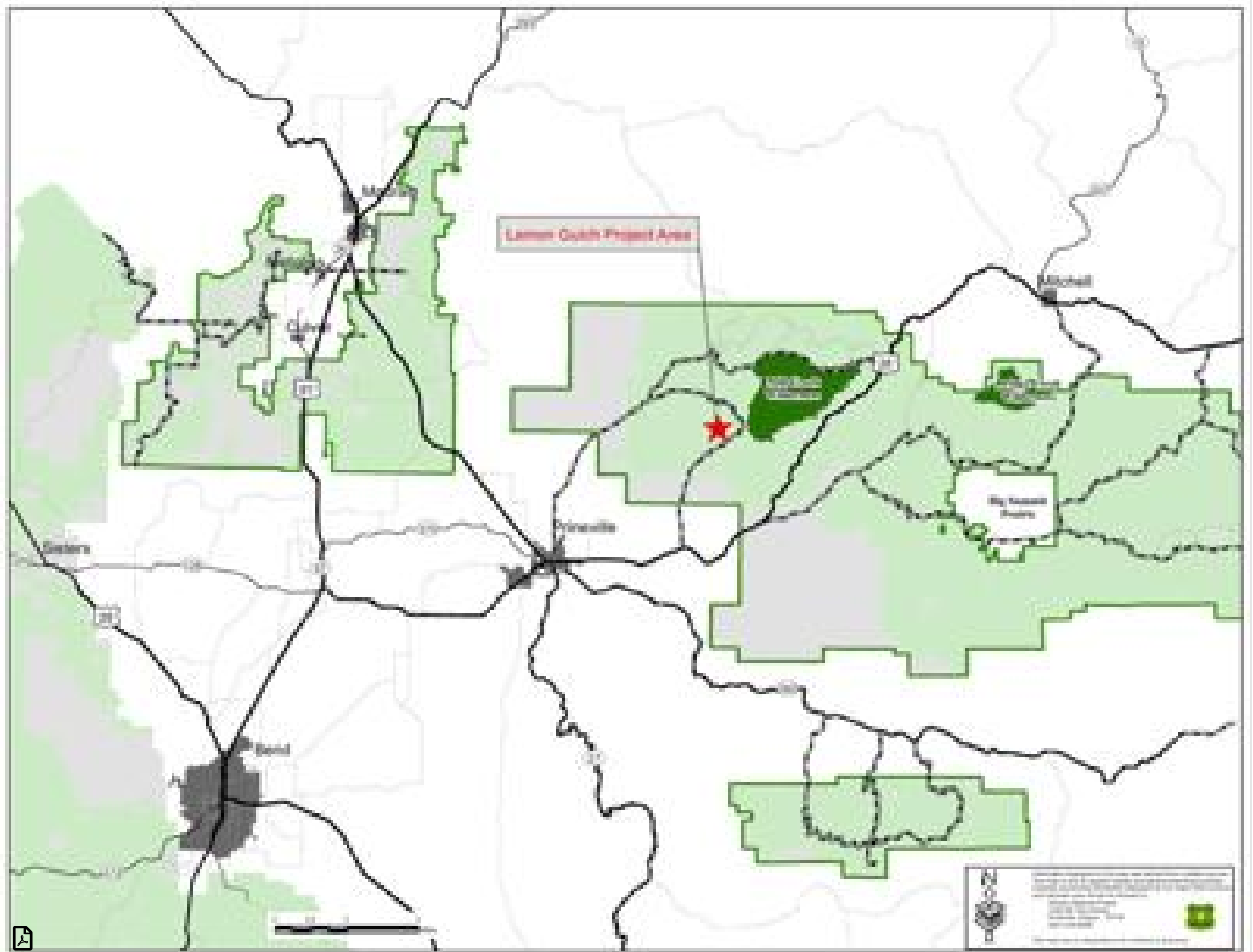
"I don't think I've ever heard of a mountain bike colliding with a cow," Holman said.

Trails that meander through "technical features" require bikers to slow down, while faster trails are designed to have a clear view so that bikers have no problem stopping for obstructions, he said.

It's possible that rerouting certain trails or reducing the overall trail mileage will alleviate critics' concerns, Holman said.

"We want to get with the ranchers and look at the specifics on the map," he said. "We hope to work with them."





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### Lemon Gulch Trail System Project

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