

# Guest column: Lemon Gulch Mountain biking trail network receives support

Proposed bike trails backed by multiple stakeholders

By Travis Holman  
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Submitted photo

On Sept. 11, The Bulletin published an article about the Lemon Gulch trail system, a proposed 50-mile mountain bike trail system in the Ochoco National Forest. This column provides additional perspectives on the project.

The proposed trail system is one part of the 2019 Sustainable Trails Plan by the Ochoco Trails coalition. As stated in the plan, Ochoco Trails “is a coalition of mountain bike riders, equestrians, hikers, hunters, ranchers and business people from the Prineville area.” Land management agencies and conservation groups are also members of the coalition.

The coalition was convened in 2017 by the U.S. Forest Service. They recognized the regional population was growing quickly and use of the Ochoco National Forest was increasing, and that a proactive approach was necessary to plan a sustainable future for non-motorized recreational opportunities.

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After nearly two years of effort, including a community open house at Crook County Library attended by 100 people, the coalition submitted its plan to the Forest Service.

The 2019 Sustainable Trails Plan proposes 200 miles of equestrian, hiking, mountain biking and multi-use trails. The proposal “makes Prineville and Crook County a more attractive place to live and work, allows

our residents to reap the health benefits of outdoor recreation, and encourages visitors to come enjoy our beautiful area.”

Lemon Gulch is only one portion of the proposed recreational opportunities. It would provide a robust mountain biking experience on roughly 3,000 acres (0.3% of the 850,000-acre Ochoco National Forest) and would reduce user conflicts in other areas such as the popular Lookout and Round Mountain trails.

While preparing the Sustainable Trails Plan, the Forest Service considered multiple areas for a mountain bike trail network (as well as the other trail networks that are part of the plan). Lemon Gulch emerged as the area with the fewest impacts on wildlife and other resources.

Recently, a few people garnered media attention claiming that mountain biking is not compatible with the cattle grazing that occurs in the Lemon Gulch area a few weeks out of each year. However, mountain biking coexists with grazing in many local areas, including the Ochocos, Crooked River Grassland northeast of Terrebonne, Horse Ridge and Horse Butte east of Bend, and Cline Butte southwest of Redmond, as well as throughout the Western U.S.

Central Oregon Trail Alliance (COTA) is a local mountain bike trail stewardship and advocacy group and a member of Ochoco Trails. COTA respects ranchers’ use of public land and has a strong history working with them on projects such as installing gates and cattle guards around Central Oregon. COTA also works to educate riders about proper behavior in areas where cattle are present. COTA has engaged the three ranching families whose allotments overlap Lemon Gulch, hoping to mitigate their concerns.

The Forest Service started the environmental analysis process required by the National Environmental Policy Act in early 2021 and is required by law to finish that process within a year. During the public comment period, the Forest Service received 86 comments, nearly all of which expressed support for the Lemon Gulch trails.

Lemon Gulch is the first significant project brought forth by the Ochoco Trails coalition and is an important test for collaborative processes in Central Oregon and beyond. If the Forest Service were to block this project at the urging of a very small number of private parties, what incentive would stakeholders have to come to the table and do the hard work of

compromising in the future? Let's hope this project comes out as a shining example of what trail user groups can achieve when we work together.

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Travis Holman is vice president of the Central Oregon Trail Alliance. COTA Executive Director Emmy Andrews also contributed to this column.