



July 7, 2020

District Ranger Gordon P. Martin
Attn: Erin Noesser, Matt Paruolo
Inyo National Forest
351 Pacu Lane, Suite 200
Bishop, CA, 93514

Submitted via email to elnoesser@fs.fed.us and matthew.paruolo@usda.gov

Re: Lakes Basin and Sherwins Area Trail Enhancement Project Scoping

Dear Mr. Martin,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Lakes Basin and Sherwins Area Trail Enhancement Project Scoping Notice and Proposed Action. These joint comments are submitted on behalf of Outdoor Alliance, Winter Wildlands Alliance, the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), Sierra Eastside Mountain Biking Association (SEMBA), and the California Mountain Biking Association (CAMTB), national, regional and local recreation and conservation organizations collectively representing tens of thousands of avid human-powered outdoor recreationists who live locally and/or regularly visit Mammoth Lakes and the Sherwins area to hike, trail run, mountain bike, backcountry ski or snowboard, or otherwise enjoy and care for the high-value public lands and roadless areas managed by the Inyo National Forest.

We are very encouraged to see the Inyo National Forest continuing to engage directly with local community partners and with longstanding collaborative efforts to improve public-access non-motorized recreation opportunities, partnership, stewardship, and conservation in the highly user-impacted areas between the Town of Mammoth Lakes urban boundary and the John Muir Wilderness. We fully support the rationale behind the proposed action as articulated in the Scoping Notice, and applaud this first earnest step toward implementation of these collaborative planning efforts and formal studies,¹ as

¹ As noted, the proposed trail improvements have been developed in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service through public process and formal studies dating back to 2008 ([Sherwin Area Trails Special Study](#)). In 2009, the [Sherwins Working Group](#), an “independent, community-based body of stakeholders” conducted public meetings over the course of a year, with a purpose of providing “safe and



well as of specific sustainable recreation plan components from the newly-adopted Inyo National Forest Land Management Plan.²

For too many decades these frontcountry areas have been left unmanaged, resulting in extensive and unnecessary impacts to ecological integrity, including damage to sensitive riparian areas, species, vegetation and watersheds, as well as to invaluable archaeological and cultural resources.³ All of these impacts have in turn adversely

environmentally responsible use [...] to minimize conflict between different forms of recreation and between recreation of all types and the environment". The Solitude Canyon proposal was derived from this effort and subsequent adoption of the [Sherwins Area Recreation Plan](#), and from significant further study in recent years into the feasibility and potential impacts of this proposed trail. In 2010, the Town of Mammoth Lakes (TOML), USFS, Mammoth Lakes Trails and Public Access (MLTPA), and Friends of the Inyo (FOI) partnered to develop the [Lakes Basin Special Study](#) which determined a need to "preserve and enhance existing facilities" and to provide "sustainable access and natural-resource protection" in the project area. The proposed Mammoth Lakes Basin connector trails are consistent with the findings of this Special Study, and input provided by NGO partners including MLTPA and FOI. Further rationale is derived from the TOML [Walk Bike Ride Action Plan](#) (2017) to promote "bicycle, pedestrian, transit, and parking alternatives within the community". The proposed Solitude Canyon Trail is specifically designed to be accessed from existing U.S. Forest Service trailheads, multi-use pathways, and the to-be-constructed Sherwins Trailhead for which NEPA/CEQA is already complete. This trailhead will provide free public transit (trolley) access adjacent to an underserved [Disadvantaged Community](#) as defined by the State of California. While there is an abundance of multi-use trails that may be accessed with purchase of a Mammoth Mountain Bike Park pass, there are glaringly few opportunities for non-motorized recreation provided to "underserved communities, minorities and urban youth" (see [Inyo National Forest Land Management Plan](#); Objectives), or to the broader community of forest users.

² [Land Management Plan for the Inyo National Forest](#), September 2019, Chapter 2, *Forestwide Desired Conditions and Management Direction: Sustainable Recreation*, pp. 53-57. Also Appendix B, p. 147, Proposed and Possible Actions, eg. to "[c]ollaborate with local communities, Tribes, partner organizations, and Federal, State, and local agencies to restore, maintain, and enhance recreation settings impacted by climate change, declining ecosystem health, wildfire and inappropriate use to improve the quality of outdoor experiences and to promote citizen stewardship of public lands"; to "[e]ffectively manage concentrated recreation use; provide a quality visitor experience while managing ecosystem effects within sustainable levels"; and to "[c]ollaborate with neighboring communities, partner organizations, State and local agencies, Tribes and adjacent Forest Service and National Park Service units to provide recreation opportunities that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable."

³ Due to the absence of multi-use public-access non-wilderness trails on a landscape level, hundreds of miles of user-created trails have been illegally constructed within the last 5-10 years throughout the Eastern Sierra, including several within the project-area. These trails are not being constructed with any form of environmental review and in many cases, directly impact sensitive cultural and natural resources that need protecting. These user-created trails contribute to non-point source impacts to water quality and negatively impact wildlife and forest resources. Sustainably built trails by contrast adhere to U.S. Forest Service BMPs, provide consistent grade, avoid sensitive cultural and natural resources, and minimize the need for ongoing maintenance. Impacts to public lands will continue to escalate if the Forest Service does not work collaboratively with its regional partners to provide sustainable trails-based opportunities. As we understand it, the proposed trail-alignments were selected based on preliminary review with Forest Service staff, and are anticipated to be the least impactful to the environment and demanding of agency



affected the quality of the visitor experience in these areas, causing many who seek quality trail access to opt instead to drive to the Mammoth Lakes Basin, adding to vehicular traffic and parking issues, greenhouse gas emissions, adverse impacts to sensitive soils and watersheds, and further concentrated user impacts in higher-quality Wilderness and Wilderness-adjacent areas.

For these reasons we are very pleased to see the Forest Service begin to take tangible steps toward mitigating these impacts, taking advantage of existing local partnership opportunities and currently available municipal funding sources to provide sustainably designed and managed non-motorized system trails in place of the existing and unsustainable informal use network, and at the same time to improve non-motorized trail access and opportunities between existing and approved trailheads adjacent to the Town of Mammoth Lakes, the Mammoth Lakes Basin, and the Wilderness areas beyond.

We understand and appreciate the concerns that have been raised regarding public process, transparency, and the District Ranger’s preliminary assessment “that this proposal has the potential to fall under categorical exclusion 36 CFR 220.6(e)(1) — *Construction and reconstruction of trails.*” Especially in the context of the current national conversation regarding the “streamlining” of environmental assessment and decision-making, and of NEPA regulations in particular, it is absolutely the responsibility and obligation of the Forest Service to follow the spirit and the letter of the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as its own regulations, to perform a thorough, transparent and meaningful science-based analysis of potential impacts to wildlife and other natural and cultural resources, as well as possible ecological and social benefits, and to share that analysis with the public.

We expect that the Forest Service will carefully consider all comments received during this scoping period and incorporate the information provided in determining the next steps for this project. If during this preliminary assessment phase and field surveys, the agency’s resource specialists identify any extraordinary circumstances or need for mitigation related to the proposed action, in particular with regard to potential adverse wildlife or habitat impacts caused by a proposed new trail segment in Solitude Canyon

resources. We assume and encourage that this project will, wherever possible, make use of prior disturbed areas and existing roads and trails to minimize impacts.



or on the Sherwins Crest, we expect the Forest Service to undertake a full and meaningful Environmental Assessment (EA).⁴

If a more thorough EA or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is deemed necessary for that segment of trail, we would encourage the Forest Service to: (1) allow trail construction and restoration to begin as soon as possible on those other segments deemed to “not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the environment” (eg. in the Mammoth Lakes Basin); and (2) to work with local agencies, NGOs, and other interested partners—again, taking advantage of current funding and partnership opportunities while they exist—to develop a more holistic proposal that would also include analysis of the full range of landscape-level benefits and impacts of the entire collaborative-proposed non-motorized sustainable trails network, with various alternatives, including sustainable trail construction and restoration in the Sherwins Meadow and throughout the Mammoth Lakes Basin.

Regardless of the level of NEPA analysis, we encourage the Forest Service to share with the public all of the studies, data, field surveys and analyses utilized in this decision-making process by posting this information on the project website. Transparency is an important element of the NEPA process, as it helps the public to understand and review federal decisions, ensuring the greatest possible degree of public trust that these decisions are in fact grounded in the best available information and science.

Finally, we also appreciate and share concerns over the potential for motorized e-bike incursion on designated non-motorized trails and in semi-primitive non-motorized recreation settings. For this reason, we encourage the Forest Service to continue to work with the Town of Mammoth Lakes, local NGOs, and other partners to fund, develop, and implement comprehensive regulatory signage packages, maps, and other robust wayfinding tools and interpretive resources to educate the public with regard to public lands designations, allowed uses, and trail-system etiquette to help minimize conflicts between users. We also hope to see further development, implementation, and coordination between USFS-approved and TOML-funded Trail Host and Trail Ambassador programs (currently managed by the Mammoth Lakes Trail System and

⁴ See 36 CFR § 220.6(b), which states that the Responsible Official must use information gathered during scoping to determine if there is a cause and effect relationship between a proposed action and the potential effect on the resource conditions listed in 36 CFR § 220.6(b)(1), and if such a relationship exists, whether the degree of the potential effect is of an extent to constitute an extraordinary circumstance.



Friends of the Inyo, respectively) to better provide on-the-ground interpretive and educational services to trail-system users. Lastly, we expect the Forest Service to engage in the enforcement of rules and regulations and the issuance of appropriate citations when and as warranted.

Again, we appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on this Scoping Notice, and very much look forward to ongoing participation in the planning and implementation of this and other future recreation and conservation projects on the Inyo National Forest that will serve to disperse and manage use, mitigate impacts to soils, plants, species, and watersheds, connect communities to nature (creating advocates and interpretive opportunities), foster shared stewardship, and improve access to non-motorized opportunities for all. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David Page
Policy Director
Outdoor Alliance California

Todd Keller
Director of Government Affairs
International Mountain Biking Association

Mike Braun
President
Sierra Eastside Mountain Bike Association

Jake Bayless
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