

Fighting for the Lionhead

Area cyclists propose a special designation *by Kira Stoops*



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Mountain biking is not a crime—unless you're in a Wilderness Area. That's why the Montana Mountain Bike Alliance (MMBA) seeks a relatively new bike-friendly designation: A National Protection Area, or NPA, for some of their beloved backcountry. Since this June, the MMBA has been attempting to arrange an NPA designation for the Lionhead portion of the Gallatin National Forest near West Yellowstone. Currently, the area is marked for consideration as a Wilderness Area, which effectively bans biking.

Lionhead bikers have known they were pedaling on borrowed time since 1987, when the United States Department of Agriculture proposed a Wilderness designation for the Lionhead area. Since then, the fate of the 32,780-acre roadless unit along the Continental Divide between Henry Lake and Hebgen Lake has drifted across desks and cropped up in some Montana bills, but has never made it to the final decision-maker: Congress.

In December 2006, the Gallatin National Forest Service decided to ban bikes in the

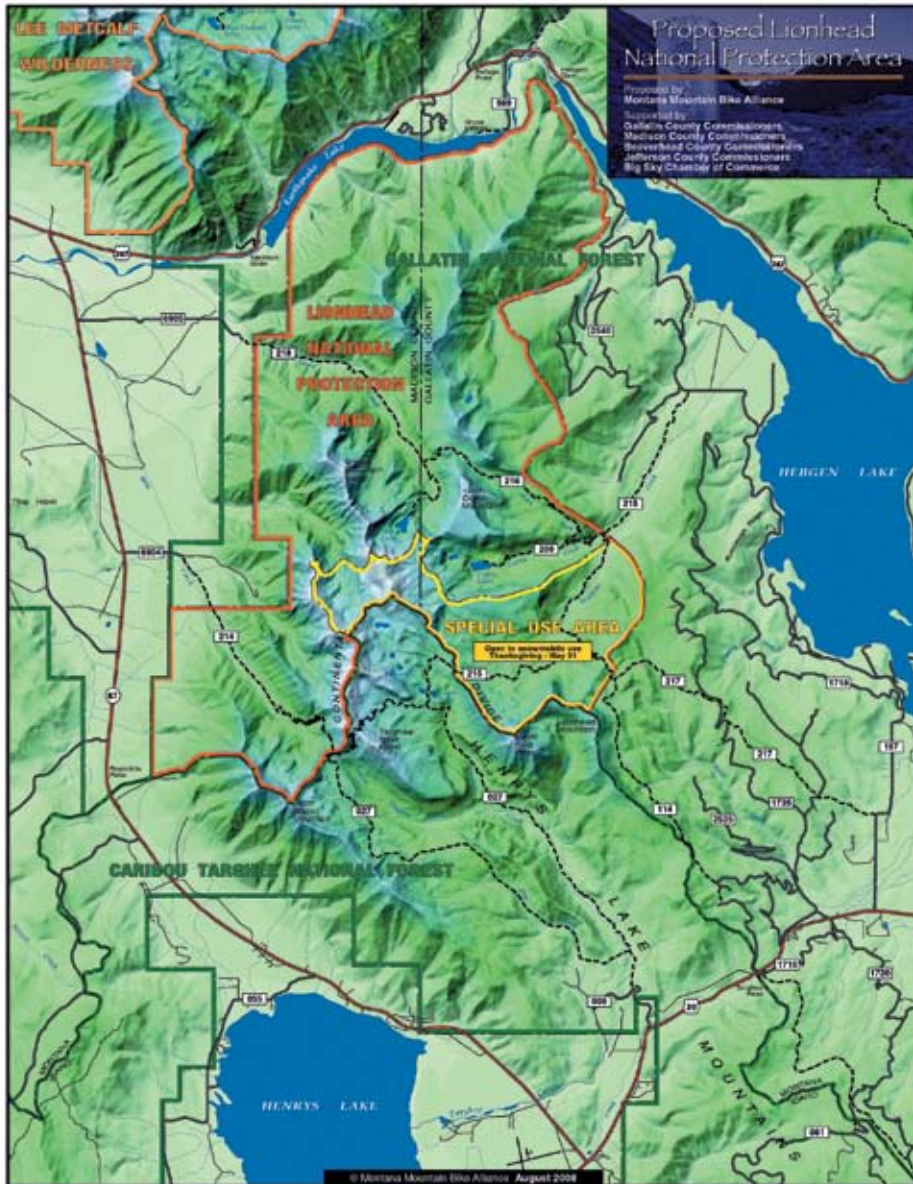
Lionhead through its upcoming forest plan, and the Wilderness issue continued to waver. Fortunately, the Forest Service amended its decision last spring to include a public comment solicitation, asking for local opinions before it enacted its self-dubbed "Bicycle Prohibition."

Montana Mountain Bike Alliance vice president Corey Biggers certainly had an opinion, especially since the Forest Service's plan would close access to favorite Lionhead trails: Coffin Lakes Trail #209, Mile Creek Trail #214, West Fork Watkins Creek Trail #216, and Sheep Lake Trail #218—trails built or maintained in part by bicyclists' volunteer efforts. But rather than simply fight the bike ban, Biggers looked for a larger solution. Inspired by the International Mountain Bike Association's (IMBA) efforts to successfully create two bike-friendly National Protection Areas in Colorado, Biggers thought a similar designation could save biking in Lionhead.

A National Protection Area designation could afford the Lionhead many of the same protections as a Wilderness Area: prohibiting mining, roads, structures, water projects, and

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west yellowstone



logging. Both designations allow new trails, hiking, horse travel, and hunting. The main difference between the two is that National Protection Areas allow bicycling, some snowmobile access in special-use areas, and mechanized trail maintenance and fire fighting, whereas Wilderness Areas do not.

Biggers is quick to emphasize that the proposed NPA has advantages for more than just bikers. As the area borders are currently drawn, harvestable timber rests safely outside the proposed areas. As for ranchers, the NPA allows cattle grazing. Horseback hunters, fishermen, hikers, and pack and saddle groups would all be able to explore the Continental Divide area. With mechanized trail maintenance and interested bikers as a ready source for likely volunteers, the Forest Service could have more

tools at its disposal with an NPA. And though the trails would be quiet in the summer, snowmobilers could enjoy them during the snowpacked months, in a special-use area located in the southern portion of the NPA, mostly in Idaho.

These are precisely the reasons the Montana Wilderness Association (MWA) opposes the plan, and why other conservation interests have taken a neutral stance on the NPA. John Gatchell, conservation director for the Montana Wilderness Association, says, "We're disappointed that mountain bikers are promoting a motorized recreation area in a currently roadless, quiet area. Grizzlies, wolverines, and mountain goats need the Lionhead as their winter refuge." Along with the Great Divide Cycling Team, the Prickly Pear

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Land Trust, and others, the MWA is instead trying to push forth the Montana High Divide Trail System, a motorless initiative aimed at preserving “quiet” trails.

Most of the proposed special-use area for snowmobilers is open to motorized use already, though it would open a small section of new terrain to snowmobilers. As a bicycling organization, MMBA isn't taking a stand for or against snowmobile use. It views the snowmobile boundary as a very negotiable part of the deal, and snowmobile groups in support of the NPA are open to negotiations as well. Both NPAs in Colorado allow snowmobiling. ATVs and OHVs are not permitted in NPAs.

However, much of the Montana side of the NPA is off-limits to snowmobilers, preserving acres of winter habitat. (The area falls mainly within Gallatin and Madison counties, with another proposed 15,000 acres in Targhee County, Idaho.) The MMBA has also discussed leaving some of the proposed NPA as true Wilderness Area—so long as the four major trails and connection corridors are still open to bicyclists. In the past, the MMBA has supported Wilderness designations for areas such as the Beaverhead, asking only for boundary adjustments that preserved bike-access to trails and corridors.

Despite conservationist dissent, The MMBA's proposal is gaining support from the general public, county commissioners, and local businesses. Even with such endorsements, Biggers says, “It could take up to 14 years to get Congress to take action on this.” He urges people who support the NPA to write to their elected representatives to get the measure pushed forward to Congress. Ultimately, it's the President's signature that seals the deal. The Forest Service is likely to make a decision on the bicycle prohibition within the next few months, although the MMBA has requested that they suspend further action while it develops the NPA proposal.

“Forty-two percent of the Gallatin National Forest is already set aside with a Wilderness designation,” says Biggers, “Sharing 26,000 acres in Montana seems like the right thing to do.”

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