

FRIENDS IN THE FOREST

HOW THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE
BACKS MOUNTAIN BIKING

BY GARY SPRUNG

THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE DESERVES AN award. Call it "Best Friend of Mountain Biking." During my 6 years of writing about off-road cycling, I've seen the Forest Service—the agency and its 35,000 people—consistently act with fairness, openness, and even encouragement toward our sport.

The bottom line: The USFS has adopted a policy that keeps all 191 million acres of land that it oversees open to mountain bikes unless there's a compelling reason to close it. This contrasts sharply with the position of the National Park Service (and too many state and local land management agencies), which has closed its land unless there's overriding evidence or pressure to open it.

Thankfully, national forests constitute the second largest block of U.S. public land and incorporate 114,000 miles of trails, so the Forest Service's positive attitude about mountain biking is extremely significant.

Designated Wilderness areas in national forests are closed to bicycles. This '84 policy decision, one of the first land access edicts to restrict mountain biking, eliminated millions of acres and thousands of trail miles from our domain. Yet I can't fault the USFS for the Wilderness closure. There are reasonable arguments on both sides.

MULTI-USE TRADITION

Positive USFS actions also began in '84 when the agency added mountain bike difficulty ratings to its trail handbook. These ratings were developed in coordination with the National Off-Road Bicycle Association (see "Trail Standards," November).

The next milestone came in '86. Recreation planner Gordon Hain wrote a paper, *Developing Mountain Bike Opportunities on the Ochoco National Forest* [Oregon]. After mapping and signing several national forest rides, he wrote, "I found that the bicycle, being challenging, made trail travel exciting. Also, it offered a new perspective on the forest. I was amazed at how much more I could see and how many more areas I could access." Hain purchased what was probably the first official USFS mountain bike.

Today, foresters throughout America are following Hain's lead. The Forest Service's traditional philosophy of "multiple-use" has spurred this development.

From its beginning in 1905, the mission of the Forest Service has always encompassed diverse elements. (The national forest system was actually established in 1891 as forest reserves, so it's celebrating its centennial this year.) At first it was just timber and water. It has since expanded to encompass outdoor recreation, wildlife and fish habitat, minerals, wilderness, and other uses.

Susan Rutherford, a recreation planner at the USFS's Washington, DC, headquarters, says, "Recreation on Forest Service land was originally just hunters, anglers, and campgrounds. Now it's also bird-watching, wildlife photography, driving for pleasure, wilderness experience, off-highway vehicles, llama packing, etc. We expect the overall demand for recreation will grow, and technology will lead to further diversification of users."

NATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Here's a representative list of USFS mountain bike activities that offers a sense of what it's doing to promote off-road cycling:

—The Apalachicola National Forest in northern Florida has developed the 19-mile Munson Hill trail in cooperation with a local bicycle club. The trail includes winding forest routes and adds a branch to a paved rail-trail. The USFS installed bathrooms and fresh water taps at the trailhead.

—The Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina is working with the Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association (SORBA) to provide alternatives to the Appalachian Trail, which is closed to bicycles along its entire 1,800-mile length. With USFS direction, SORBA volunteers are maintaining and improving trails. The Forest opened to bicycles some old timber roads that were closed to motor vehicles and had reverted to singletracks.

—In the White Mountain National Forest of New Hampshire, foresters have developed the 25-mile Cherry Mountain Loop, which utilizes snowmobile trails and gravel back roads, providing intermediate-level cycling with climbs of 1,500 to 2,200 feet. They're planning a 16-mile loop next, and will designate 5 trails in the next couple years.

—In the Superior National Forest in Minnesota, recreation forester Becky Spears surveyed cyclists at visitor centers, resorts, and other popular locations. When she discovered that mountain biking is just taking root there, she began working with local tourism associations to develop several trails on Lake Superior's north shore. The work was performed by agency staff.

—In Ketchum, Idaho, U.S. forester Butch Harper has struggled to maintain trails designed long ago for transport, not mountain bicycling. One trail developed a deep rut, making it negotiable only by experts. Instead of closing it, Harper rerouted it. He also built a 6-mile trail for mountain bike use.

—In the Arapahoe-Roosevelt

National Forest just west of Denver, district ranger Ed Ryberg and recreation technician Len Newton developed the 40-mile Buffalo Creek Mountain Bike Area using closed logging roads. As in the Superior National Forest, this effort was initiated and managed by Forest Service staff.

Other foresters in the Arapahoe-Roosevelt district work with the Winter Park FATS volunteer group to foster a sophisticated mountain bike patrol team. The Forest has entered into a legal agreement with the club and even provides radios for the patrolling cyclists.

—At the Missoula, Montana, Regional USFS office, Andy Kulla works as a recreation planner. As a private citizen, he serves as chairman of LIMB, the Low Impact Mountain Bicyclists. This cycling advocacy group has developed an exciting, fresh approach to mountain bike management. In its recent "Egg-stravaganza" competition, for example, cyclists rode through the forest, picked up eggs, and carried them one at a time to the finish. Riders were scored by how many they brought in unbroken, which meant they had to ride softly, with minimal impact on the trail and environment.

LIMB has taken advantage of the Forest Service's "Challenge Cost-Share" grant program. LIMB raised \$500, the USFS matched it, and the money is being spent on brochures and hang tags that promote mountain bike etiquette and environmental awareness.

—Also in Missoula, the USFS National Technology Development Center is creating standards for the design, construction, and improvement of mountain bike trails. The standards will explain how to build trails to minimize bicycle impact on soil via drainage structures, slope, and surface texture; make natural barriers for speed control; and maximize visibility to allow for safe passing zones. Much like the '84 trail difficulty ratings, these will serve as a precedent and a tool for land managers everywhere.

FIRST BIKE RANGER

Crested Butte, Colorado (my home), enjoys a reputation as a mountain bike mecca, with an extraordinary array of singletracks. Nearly all these trails are part of the Gunnison

National Forest system. Mountain bikers here used national forest trails for a decade before the agency got involved. In '89, district ranger Pam Bode noticed that maps issued by local cycling shops showed trails "which we did not know even existed," she recalls. "It made me very nervous as a land manager to think that recreation users were building trails at will without any environmental analysis and without consideration for impacts to other resources, like grazing and wildlife habitat."

So Bode created a temporary position for "trails management" and hired Dan Jagaciewski, who quickly dubbed himself "the mountain bike ranger." His primary job was to ride with cyclists, promote cooperation, and inventory the unofficial trails. He was asked to decide which trails should be placed on the Forest Service trail system, and which should be obliterated. He also was instructed to determine whether moun-



In LIMB's soft cycling 'Egg-stravaganza,' cyclists rode through the forest, picked up eggs, and carried them gingerly to the finish.



tain bikers were having significant adverse impacts on trails and other forest users.

"He found that for the most part, bikers had environmental ethics and were very willing to cooperate with other resource users if they knew what the impacts were," Bode reports.

A test of that willingness came when a local rancher closed a section of official USFS trail (the famous No. 409) because recreationists were leaving gates open, allowing his cattle to escape. Rather than fight the rancher, Bode turned to cyclists for help. Jagaciewski coordinated a massive volunteer effort to reroute the trail so that it stayed entirely on public land. Mountain bikers worked for many days, putting in a total of a thousand hours of free labor etching a trail surface into a field of boulders and scree.

Soon thereafter, Jagaciewski helped us organize the Crested Butte Mountain Bike Association. We now have a formal voice in dealing with the USFS and local ranchers and landowners.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

If you ride on national forest land, you can probably imagine how a USFS mountain bike ranger in your area could perform valuable service. To get one, you must convince your local district ranger or forest supervisor that local mountain bikers have problems and opportunities that can best be addressed by a USFS employee. You can point to the Gunnison National Forest as a successful model.

One question, of course, may be the availability of USFS money to pay for a new staffer. Most federal agencies are weathering staff reductions and other budget cutbacks. On the other hand, the Bush Administration

has created a budget initiative called "America's Great Outdoors," which calls for 3 years of increased funding to repair and restore public recreation facilities. (The final budget appropriation for '92 was still being discussed as this issue went to press.)

Mountain bikers need to realize that foresters have many different constituencies. And there's always the possibility that new user groups will emerge. As Rocky Mountain regional forester Gary Cargill says, "I sometimes lie awake at night wondering who is working in their garage or basement concocting the next recreation contraption."

That next invention will cause Forest Service land managers new problems. But their experience managing mountain bikes and their accommodating attitude should serve them well. ●