

IMAGINE ONE MILLION MILES OF ROADS and trails, much of it mountainous, hardly any of it paved, and virtually all of it open to mountain biking.

Fantasy? No, it's a network that already exists on the 273 million acres of land in 12 Western states managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

Historically, grazing and mineral extraction were BLM priorities, which is why critics have derisively interpreted its acronym to mean "Bureau of Livestock and Mining." But as the West turns toward economies based on outdoor recreation and tourism, the BLM is turning, too.

The BLM was created in '46 when Congress merged several small agencies in the Department of Interior. In '76, Congress passed the first comprehensive law governing the agency, mandating the same multi-use land management approach followed by the U.S. Forest Service (which is part of the Department of Agriculture). This approach dictates that trails should be open to ecologically sound uses of all kinds unless there's a compelling reason to close them. Thus,

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The BLM's videotape portrays mountain biking as environmentally sound. Off-road cyclists of the '90s are likened to the backpackers of the '70s.

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nearly all BLM trails remain open to cyclists.

This multi-use mandate and BLM's new emphasis on recreation should produce tremendous new off-road cycling opportunities. The trails are there, but only a few are marked. Soon BLM could stand for "Best Land for Mountain bikers."

MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

BLM entered the mountain bike business in '88 when it created Kokopelli's Trail, a 128-mile route from Grand Junction, Colorado, to Moab, Utah. Cyclists had been riding in a wilderness study area a few miles west of Grand Junction, and BLM saw instances of damage to fragile soils. Rather than banning

A MILLION MILES OF MOUNTAIN BIKING

THE BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT OVERSEES ONE-EIGHTH OF THE U.S. AND IT'S PREPARING TO WELCOME US

BY GARY SPRUNG

cycling in the area, the agency worked with local cyclists and bike shops to build 10 miles of new singletrack and link existing routes. Kokopelli's Trail now attracts cyclists from afar and stands as a showcase of what can be accomplished by a "can-do" attitude.

From Kokopelli's Trail sprang COPMOBA, the Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Association. This group created a 148-mile trail from Grand Junction south to Montrose,

cyclists of the '90s are likened to the backpackers of the '70s.

Inspired by the successes of Kokopelli's, the Tabeguache trail and the Durango symposium, the BLM launched a national Mountain Bike Initiative last spring. The agency gathered together 25 land managers and bike activists for a weekend of rides and strategy sessions on the Tabeguache Trail.

Linda DuPriest (Specialized), Tim Blumenthal (managing editor of BICYCLING PLUS MOUNTAIN BIKE), and vice-president Michael Kelley represented the International Mountain Bicycling Association. Other cycling advocates who attended included John Cornelison, former executive director of the League of American Wheelmen, and COPMOBA leaders Timms Fowler and Bill Harris.

Brainstorming sessions during the Tabeguache ride led to the creation of the Mountain Bike Task Force, a smaller working group charged with formulating a BLM mountain bike promotion strategy. This group met in Portland, Oregon, in July and adopted the following goal for BLM's Mountain Bike Initiative:

"BLM will identify and implement diverse mountain bike opportunities into the multiple use system of trails and roads by the year 2000. These opportunities will be enhanced by a pro-active, educational program emphasizing safety, fitness, ethics, and environmental protection and appreciation."

The working group met again in December in Palm Springs, California, to finish a marketing plan and to fine-tune the initiative. Its

Colorado, via the Uncompaghre Plateau. Much of the trail is on BLM land.

During the '90 World Mountain Bike Championships in Durango, Colorado, the BLM hosted a land official's symposium on managing the sport. BLM's Durango area manager Sally Wisely then produced an off-road cycling management videotape in conjunction with the U.S. Forest Service.

The video describes mountain bicyclists as "a hard group to pin down" because of our diversity, and labels the sport as "one of the greatest challenges facing land managers." But generally, mountain biking is portrayed as wholesome and environmentally sound. Off-road cy-

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goal is to ensure that BLM officials everywhere understand the agency's perspective on mountain biking and relay a clear message to the public.

A NEED FOR PARTNERSHIPS

BLM has always had the land and the trails management expertise necessary to promote mountain biking. The recent initiative has provided a



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mission and is sparking new enthusiasm. But 2 crucial elements are still needed: money and volunteer labor.

Historically, nearly all of BLM's mountain biking successes have come through private/public partnerships that combine financial support from businesses, volunteer

labor from cyclists, and management guidance from the BLM. This pattern of development will continue.

The BLM has identified 12 mountain bike trail projects in 5 states that are ready to begin, says Barb Sharrow, a BLM outdoor recreation planner in Colorado who has been coordinating the Mountain Bike Task Force effort. She says, "The en-

vironmental assessments have been completed, and the trails are ready to be constructed. Now, we just need the money."

BLM's fiscal '92 federal appropriation contains no sum specifically for mountain bike trail identification or development. To promote new partnerships, the BLM has created a

Challenge Cost Share program that provides money to match private sector contributions. It's modeled after a successful Forest Service effort. Also, the agency staffed booths at the bicycle industry's 2 fall trade shows and spoke with manufacturers about establishing partnerships.

Given its mammoth territory, the BLM's biggest job in promoting off-road cycling may be trail identification. That's why the agency is hoping bike manufacturers and dealers will support volunteer groups willing to ride and chart routes.

Another challenge, says Sharrow, is building public awareness of the BLM, the diversity of its holdings, and the extent of its cycling opportunities. "At the bike show in Atlantic City, most of the dealers we talked with had never heard of the Bureau of Land Management," she says. "They had no idea that there's so much public land available in the West for mountain biking."

But there is. And it's much more than grazing land and abandoned mines. Sharrow says, "I think pro-

moting mountain biking is a marvelous opportunity for the BLM to showcase its river corridors, Indian ruins, and diversity of wildlife species.”

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MOAB UPDATE

THE BLM'S HOTTEST MOUNTAIN BIKING spot continues to be the famous Slickrock Trail in Moab, Utah. The trail was originally marked by motorcyclists, but in '90 mountain bikers outnumbered motorized users 100-1. A trailhead traffic counter recorded 55,000 entries between October '90 and September '91, nearly all of them cyclists.

The agency continues to battle sanitation problems created by the large number of people camping near the Slickrock's most popular entrance on Sand Flats Road. Congress appropri-

ated \$350,000 last spring to pay for the construction of permanent restrooms at camping areas near the trail. Other improvements that have been recently completed include a trailhead parking area that holds 75–100 cars, signs, and a human waste dumping transfer station.

Bicycle-mounted transmitters and a space satellite were recently used in a BLM-backed effort to produce extremely accurate, computerized coordinates of the Slickrock Trail. The Latitude 40! mapping company took this information, plotted it, and superimposed it onto an aerial photo to create a beautiful map of the trail. (It's available at many Western bike shops for \$5.95.)

The BLM is working to expand its canyon country cycling routes to other areas of the state. One example is a joint BLM/COPMOBA effort to create a 190-mile route across the San Rafael Swell, an uplifted area in central Utah. Cyclists may eventually enjoy unpaved riding all the way between Moab and Salt Lake City.

—G.S. ●