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# Mountain Biking: Issues and Actions for USDA Forest Service Managers

**Deborah J. Chavez**



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## **Abstract**

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Managers of National Forests are faced with many challenges related to the growing use of mountain bikes. To determine the issues and management actions associated with this growth, USDA Forest Service managers from across the United States were surveyed. Managers from at least two National Forests from every Region (except Alaska) reported annual use of trails by 10,000 or more mountain bike riders. On the basis of this use, managers reported concerns and impacts related to the natural resources (degradation of trails, wilderness), social institutions (safety, education), and social policy (planning, legal claims); and offered management actions for resolving these problems.

*Retrieval Terms:* conflict, management, mountain biking, planning, safety

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**M**ountain bike riding on National Forests is a relatively new and growing activity. To determine the potential management issues associated with this sport, a national survey of USDA Forest Service resource managers was conducted. Responses were received from 90 National Forests.

The objectives of the research were to describe the amount of mountain bike riding on National Forests throughout the United States; determine the level of planning currently used by Forest Service managers to deal with issues related to mountain bike use; and examine management issues and actions related to mountain bike use of National Forests including resource damage, user conflicts, safety, and accidents.

Responses were received from every region of the National Forest System and almost all of them reported mountain bike activity (98 percent). At least two National Forests from every region (except Region 10 [the Alaska Region]) reported use of greater than 10,000 mountain bike riders per year. Estimated use varied greatly and ranged from 50 riders to 376,000 riders annually. Half the Forests reported 4,500 or fewer mountain bike riders annually while another 25 percent reported between 15,000 and 376,000 mountain bike riders annually.

Slightly more than half (53 percent) of the Forests responding to the survey had provisions for mountain bike riding in their Forest plans. Ten percent of those responding to the survey reported the management of mountain bike use as one of the highest priority issues on their forest.

A general question about concerns related to mountain bike use showed that of most concern to the Forests were the effects on natural resources (42 percent), conflicts with other user groups (34 percent), safety concerns (13 percent), illegal use in designated wilderness (13 percent), and the growth of the sport (12 percent).

Forest managers were also asked about specific problems related to mountain bike use including reports of user conflicts (70 percent had observed or received reports), safety issues (59 percent), resource damage (58 percent), and accidents (48 percent) as well as management actions they had used for these problems. The management actions were grouped into several categories, such as providing information to users; interacting personally with the user groups either directly or through partnerships; promoting user ethics; and maintaining the trails.

Many additional research studies are needed. Topics include the value of bike patrols and partnerships for alleviating conflict or resource damage; trail construction that can alleviate damage problems; mountain biking interactions with community development; and if displacement of trail users is an issue. A comparable survey of Forest Service and USDI Bureau of Land Management and National Park Service resource managers is also needed.

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