

CRC Seeks Community Input for Managing the Horseshoe Hills

By Megan Birzell

At the beginning of the month, the Clearwater Resource Council hosted a tour of the Horseshoe Hills, a 9,000-acre parcel of Forest Service land south of the Double Arrow Ranch. The Horseshoe Hills area, originally owned by Plum Creek, was purchased by The Nature Conservancy in 2005 as part of the Blackfoot Community Project. In 2006 and 2007 it was sold to the Forest Service, and the Seeley Lake Ranger District is now in the process of creating a management plan for the area.

During Plum Creek's ownership of the Horseshoe Hills, the area was open to public use in the form of hiking, horseback riding, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and biking. While ATV use was not permitted, that restriction was never enforced. When The Nature Conservancy took ownership in 2005, they allowed all the same uses. However, they more strictly enforced the restriction on ATVs. To this point, the Forest Service has continued allowing the same access as Plum Creek, and they have also continued The Nature Conservancy's enforcement of proper and improper types of access.

Looking forward, the Forest Service would like to maintain open access to the Horseshoe Hills, but they must also consider the needs of the land after decades of active timber management. The agency is partnering with the Clearwater Resource Council to gain a better understanding of how the Seeley Lake community would like to see the area managed. The goal is to ensure that the Horseshoe Hills is managed in a way that reflects the needs of the land and the desires of the community that uses it.

In late September, we hosted a meeting to provide you, the community, with more information about the history and current management of the Horseshoe Hills as well as to seek your input about how the area should be managed. About a week later, we hosted a field tour in which we took 24 community members through the heart of the area so we could all better understand the issues facing the Horseshoe Hills and the opportunities and constraints for managing the area.

The input we received through these efforts suggests that the community would like to see the Horseshoe Hills become a backyard of sorts for the community - a place close to home where people can recreate. The comments we received created a vision of the area in which interconnecting trails cover the landscape and allow all people - whether on foot, horse, bike, ATV, or snowmobile - to roam through the area. Many of you who participated indicated that you would like to see responsible ATV use permitted in the area so that everyone, regardless of ability, can enjoy it.

Tour participants also expressed concern over the condition of the land in the Horseshoe Hills. They pointed out the overly dense forest and the blanket of weeds covering the meadows and asked for work to be done to restore the area to its natural condition. They also expressed concern over the fire hazard the dense forest has created and the risk it poses to Double Arrow landowners. They requested that the Forest Service complement the fuels mitigation work that private landowners on the Double Arrow have been doing on their own land by thinning out the forest surrounding the Double Arrow.

The comments and suggestions the Clearwater Resource Council received through the September meeting and October field tour have given us a much better idea of the community's desires and concerns for the future of the Horseshoe Hills. We will continue to seek community input in the future through meetings and tours, and we hope that more of the community will join in on this conversation.

To stay abreast of CRC activities related to the Horseshoe Hills, please check our website at www.crcmt.org/upcomingprograms.html. We update it regularly. You can also stop by our new office right behind the Stage Station or call Megan at 677-0069.

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