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Executive Summary

We contacted 596 individuals at the Elk River Road trailhead access into the Headwaters Forest Reserve from July 1 to September 27, 1999; 580 individuals agreed to participate. Up to four persons per group were mailed a 14-page questionnaire after their trip. Of the 580 visitors mailed a survey, 70.9% returned the survey, resulting in a sample size of 411 visitors.

Use and User Characteristics

83% of visiting groups were groups of three or fewer, and 24% were "groups" of one; 5% were part of an organized club or school group. 70% of visitors traveled 25 or fewer miles to reach to HFR; 17% traveled 200 miles or more. 79% said the HFR was the primary destination for their trip away from home.

38% of groups contacted said they hiked all the way to the overlook at the end of the trail; and additional 2-3% continued on beyond the end of the official trail. 59% of visitors were college graduates; 25% were full or part-time students. 40% of visitors belong to a conservation or environmental organization.

Visitor use levels from July through September 1999 (the first summer the area was open to the public) averaged 20 people per day on weekdays, and 38-39 people per day on weekends. Sampling ended daily at 5:30 pm.

Most visitors indicated they first found out about recreation opportunities in the HFR from newspaper articles, television news stories, and friends. Most visitors said the primary reasons for their HFR visit were to hike, explore, see old-growth, see what all the fuss was about, to show it to friends or relatives, to exercise, birdwatch, relax, or walk the dog. 81% of visitors said they planned to visit 4 or more days in advance of the day they visited. 12% of visitors got information on HFR from the Internet, although 30% said their primary source of information was newspaper articles. 19% said they most preferred to receive information from the BLM, but only 9% indicated the BLM as their primary source of information.

For trip planning purposes, visitors indicated the following types of information as most helpful: specific trail condition descriptions (66%), natural history and features of the area (57%), and directions to the trailhead (54%).

As far as recreation activity participation, 44% of visitors said they hiked off-trail, with 15% indicating that hiking off-trail was a primary reason for their visit. 49% of visitors indicated that wildlife viewing and nature study were both primary reasons for their trip, and 85-86% of visitors participated in wildlife viewing and nature study.

Perceptions of Problems

Only 8% of visitors indicated that they saw too many other hikers; crowding does not appear to be much of a problem at this time. However 25% of visitors said they noticed resource impacts caused by other recreationists; the most common were litter and dog excrement. 12% of visitors complained that the behavior of others interfered with their enjoyment; the most common problems cited were off-leash dogs and dirt bikes or mountain bikes on the trail.

79% of visitors indicated that they felt use limits were not needed now, although 52% felt that use limits should be imposed in the future if overuse occurs. The most common indicators of overuse that these

respondents felt would justify use limits were litter, damage to vegetation, and erosion. Providing information to visitors on when the heaviest use occurs and letting visitors use that information to space themselves out was preferred to an actual use limit; but if a use limit did have to be imposed, distributing a limited number of use permits on a first-come first-served basis was the most popular method of implementing a use limit, followed by limiting available trailhead parking.

Visitors were asked about selected potential resource, management, and social problems. At this time, no problems were thought to be major or moderate problems by more than 35% of visitors. The problems most commonly thought to be major or moderate were: a lack of information about the area's history and culture (thought to be a major or moderate problem by 35% of visitors); a lack of trails (35%); a lack of information about trails (30%); litter (25%); trail erosion (21%); and pets off leash (19%); and human waste (17%).

Visitors were asked about the importance of services and facilities provided by the BLM, then were asked to grade the performance of the BLM with respect to these services and facilities. The services and facilities rated as important or very important included: vehicle safe from vandalism (thought to be important or very important by 86% of visitors); trailhead signs have necessary information (85%); opportunity for personal freedom (77%); BLM staff friendly and courteous (68%); brochures and maps clearly communicate information about recreation opportunities (65%); and managers notify visitors of hazards in the area (65%). Visitors gave the BLM a grade of excellent or very good on the following items: adequate parking (rated excellent or very good by 78% of visitors); access roads in good condition (70%); trailhead signs have necessary information (60%); and BLM staff friendly and courteous (54%). The two items receiving the lowest grades (about a B-) were: "helpful directional signs" and "brochures and maps clearly communicate information about recreation opportunities."

Public Sentiment Toward Possible Management Actions and Recreational Activities

Visitors were asked about their support or opposition toward a list of possible management actions. Allowing pets off-leash received, by a wide margin, the most opposition (64%) and the least support (21%). The next least popular actions were charging a user fee and providing more trailhead parking. The actions receiving the most support were: developing loop trails within sight of the old-growth (supported by 83% of visitors); providing educational signs about the area's natural (81%) and cultural (83%) history; converting old logging roads into trails (82%); providing informational signs (81%); allowing scientific research (80%); and acquiring more land to add to the Reserve (76%).

The three recreational activities visitors supported most were hiking (95%), nature study (94%), and wildlife viewing (93%). Mountain biking, horseback riding, and hunting were all opposed by a majority of visitors (58%, 58%, and 88% respectively). Camping was supported and opposed by an equal percentage of visitors (41%, with 15% neutral and 3% not responding).

There appears to be a substantial amount of uncertainty on the part of visitors as to exactly which activities are currently permitted in the HFR--42% were unsure if fishing was allowed; 36% were unsure if riding horses was allowed; 27% weren't sure if off-trail hiking was permitted; 25% weren't sure if hunting was allowed; 25% were unsure if pets were allowed; 24% were unsure if mountain biking was allowed; and 15% and 17% respectively weren't sure if camping and campfires were allowed.

Finally, when asked about satisfaction with their visit, 67% of visitors agreed that their visit was so good they would do it again, and when asked if they intended to return for another visit 96% said yes.