Scoping Notice and Formal Comment Period

Rat River Recreational Trail
USDA Forest Service (USFS)
Lakewood-Laona Ranger District
Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest
Forest County, Wisconsin

Background
The Town of Blackwell and interested individuals would like a non-motorized trail which would link the existing Nicolet State Trail (NST) to Bear Lake Campground. The Town of Blackwell has identified non-motorized trails in their Town of Blackwell Comprehensive Plan as an opportunity to attract tourism and promote economic development to the area. Permanent and seasonal residents of the area have also expressed an interest in the trail which would provide a biking and hiking connection to the NST.

Proposed Action
The Forest Service proposes to authorize the development of a recreation corridor for all season non-motorized uses that would extend from the Nicolet State Trail into Blackwell and continuing to Bear Lake. This trail proposal would include the existing abandoned railroad grade and forest roads. Other roads-such as town and county roads may be used to connect the west and east side of the trail on national forest. These roads are outside of the proposal.

The trail is located parallel to the Rat River and presents a good opportunity for a non-motorized trail. It also has its challenges with clearing segments of the grade, removing railroad ties, culvert requirements, and potentially closing existing open roads to highway legal vehicles. Parking areas may also be created/allowed at Bear Lake Campground, National Forest System Road (NFSR) 3075 (inside the National Forest boundary-past private land), and/or at the end of NFSR 3220 (west side-depending on the legality).

The Forest Service is proposing the following:
1) Clear approximately 1.8 miles of abandoned railroad corridor, beginning at Blackwell Junction Road, which is currently overgrown and blocked with down trees.
2) Brush and remove small trees as needed along the edge of the remainder of the grade. This work will be fairly minimal since parts of the corridor are maintained as roads or snowmobile trail.
3) Remove railroad ties as needed along the grade where ties protrude above the grade. Removing the ties is necessary to develop an adequate sub-surface for the trail.
4) Install culverts as needed to provide cross-drainage.
5) A gravel surface will provide a uniform tread for biking.
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6) Install gates as needed to prevent unauthorized access.
7) Add signs along the corridor.
8) Place several picnic tables and benches at scenic locations along the Rat River.
9) Create parking areas.
10) Change the motor vehicle use designation of NFSR 3075A, NFSR 3220, and NFSR 3770B from open to highway legal vehicles to closed to highway legal vehicles.

NFSRs 3075 (open), 3075A (open seasonally), 3220 (open seasonally), and 3770B (open) are currently designated open roads for highway legal vehicles in the 2011 Chequamegon-Nicolet Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM). The NFSRs 83035, 830281, and 830241 are closed on the MVUM.

Grant Lane (east segment of NFSR 3075) is a town road and is to be open to ATV’s upon implementation of the Blackwell ATV Connector Project.

A segment of the abandoned railroad grade east of Blackwell is currently state funded snowmobile trial. This use would continue.

Purpose and Need
The current condition is that no trail currently exists in the Blackwell area that is designated for non-motorized use and connects to the NST. The NST is open to both non-motorized (hiking and biking) and motorized activities (snowmobiling and ATV’s). Bikers and hikers in the Blackwell area currently use local town and county roads open to highway legal vehicles to access the NST which creates a possible hazardous mixed use situation.

The desired condition is to create a safe recreation trail for non-motorized users from the NST to Bear Lake. The Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Lakewood-Laona District Ranger has identified a benefit to creating a trail from the NST to Bear Lake Campground. The trail would provide a new recreation activity for users of the Bear Lake Campground.

The gap between the current and desired conditions show a need to develop a trail that would connect Bear Lake to the Nicolet State Trail and would be designated for non-motorized recreation activities such as biking, hiking, and cross-country skiing. The trail would benefit users of the Bear Lake Campground, residents located on Bear Lake, Blackwell Job Corps Center, residents of the Town of Blackwell, as well as the other non-motorized use recreationists. It would also provide an alternative riding opportunity to non-motorized users of the NST.

Purpose (objectives)
The purpose or objective of this project is to move toward the desired conditions in the Chequamegon Nicolet National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan of 2004 (forest plan). The forest plan provides the following management direction for recreation desired conditions:
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Goal 2.1 “Maintain or enhance the diversity and quality of recreation experiences within acceptable limits of change to ecosystem stability and condition.” p. 1-4.

Guideline “Maximize the placement of horse and mountain bike trails in upland (dry) areas, and minimize the number of water crossings by these trails (streams, wetlands, and riparian areas)”, p.2-27.

Affected Environment

This trail would run from the NST east to the Town of Blackwell and continue east to Bear Lake Campground (see attached map). It would start at the NST, parallel the Rat River following the abandon railroad grade. Then the trail would travel along NFSR 83035, 3075A, and 3075 into the Town of Blackwell. On the east side of town the trail follows NFSR 3220, 830281, 830241, and 3770B to Bear Lake Campground. This trail would be located at T35N, R15E, Sections 8, 9, 13-16; T35N, R16E, Sections 18 and 19.

Preliminary Issues

Some preliminary issues have surfaced in the internal review and communication with the adjacent landowners.

Riparian

The whole trail runs along the river with some stream crossings. The project analysis needs to consider the drainage of the wetlands and disturbance to wildlife that nest or inhabit the river area.

Private land Right-of-way

The adjacent landowners are concerned with the creation of a trail through their private land holdings. The landowner was concerned that their land would be worthless. The owners use their land for hunting; some wanted it closed and some open for hunting season.

Management Description

The management area (MA) prescriptions for this project include 1C, 2A, and 2C. MA 1C Early Successional: Aspen and Hardwood does not address recreation. MA2A Uneven Aged Northern Hardwoods, and MA 2C Uneven Aged Northern Hardwoods, state (forest plan p. 3-7) that “a variety of motorized and non-motorized trail uses are the primary recreation”.

Decisions to be Made

Through the environmental analysis process, the District Ranger will determine whether or not this project will proceed, and if so, where and under what conditions it will proceed.

Relevant Laws and Documents

Function specific laws

The proposed trail project shall meet the requirements of the forest plan. The project shall comply fully with forest wide standards and guidelines, and the MA Direction, including that contained under MA 1C, 2A, and 2C.
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As a part of the effort to develop and describe the proposed action, the responsible official and the ID team reviewed and discussed all available information and data about the possible effects and or impacts that this action. This included the physical and biological environments in the analysis area, and the relationship between the proposal and laws, regulations, and required agency policy, if the project would be implemented.

**Comments Requested**

At this time, the Forest Service is requesting information, comments, and other assistance from Federal, State, and local agencies, and other individuals or organizations that have an interest in or could be affected by the proposed action. Specific comments are the most useful for the identification of issues and development and analysis of alternatives to the proposal.

No public participation other than this request for comments is planned. All persons who provide comment in response to this request will continue to receive information about this project and will be included in any additional public participation effort that may occur. Those who do not respond will not receive additional information. The comment period will last 30 days from the date of the letter.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Send written comments to the Responsible Official: District Ranger, Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, Lakewood-Laona Ranger District, 15085 State Road 32, Lakewood, WI 54138, Attention: Marilee Houtler. Faxed comments will also be accepted at: 715-276-3594.

E-mail comments may be sent to: comments-eastern-chequamegon-nicolet-lakewood@fs.fed.us. Our system will accept email, rtf and word formats. If comments are electronically mailed, the sender should receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive such confirmation, it is the sender’s responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. Comments may be hand delivered to the Lakewood Ranger District office between 7:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, except holidays.

Pursuant to 7 CFR 1.27 (d), any person may request the agency to withhold a submission from the public record by showing how the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) permits such confidentiality. Persons requesting such confidentiality should be aware that, under the FOIA, confidentiality may be granted in only very limited circumstances, such as to protect trade secrets. The Forest Service will inform the requester of the agency’s decision regarding the request for confidentiality, and where the request is denied; the agency will return the submission and notify the requester that the comments may be resubmitted with name and address within 10 days.

**Contact Person Information**
Rat River Recreational Trail
Darrell Richards, Assistant Ranger, Lakewood-Laona Ranger District, 4978 Hwy 8 W, Laona, WI 54541. Telephone 715-674-4481.

This Public Scoping Notice and the project map are available on the Worldwide Web at:

http://fs.usda.gov/goto/cnnf/nepa

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