



Trail crews contend with damage Trail users create havoc on muddy paths

By JASON KAUFFMAN
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Kneeling along an obscure section of the Greenhorn Gulch trail on Monday afternoon, Renee Catherine jammed a white sign beside the popular backcountry path. The message on the sign was plain: "Damage to this trail was caused by thoughtless use by motorcyclists and mountain bikers. This trail was ridden during wet conditions."

For Catherine, the amiable trails coordinator on the Sawtooth National Forest's expansive 350,000-acre Ketchum Ranger District, the task was something of a departure from her normal routine. Normally, her communication with the public is cheerier.

The same can also be said for just about every forest official in the Wood River Valley—a popular destination for mountain bikers, hikers, motorbikers and horseback riders.

But it's been an abnormal summer on the Ketchum Ranger District. A combination of record-setting rains in June and heavy recreational use on the trails that weave through the forest and sagebrush-covered hills led to an unprecedented amount of trail damage during the past month. Fixing the miles of rutted and muddied trails—which officials say is mostly the work of mountain bikers and motorbikers—will take all summer and fall, Catherine said.

Even though it's only early July, officials on the Ketchum district say they're in a race against time to have all of the fixes in place before the first winter snows. They say leaving the damaged trails as is could lead to worse damage next spring and summer. Many of the valley's trails were originally laid down as sheep or mining trails, long before planners knew what sort of uses would emerge.

The ruts, Catherine said, are a combination of bike tires and running water. In some places, narrow ruts have been gouged up to a foot deep or more by the erosive action of knobby tires grinding into wet, muddy soil. Catherine said the ruts created by the riders captured large amounts of runoff, which in turn gouged the trenches even deeper. She said those same trenches will become much larger in the next few years if the fixes aren't in place by this fall.



This section of the main trail heading up Greenhorn Gulch saw extensive damage in June as heavy rains combined with mountain bikers and motorbikers who ignored signs warning them to turn around if the trail was muddy, officials from the Sawtooth National Forest say. *Photo by Jason Kauffman*

But Ryan Schutz, Rocky Mountain Regional Director for the International Mountain Bike Association, said it's a stretch to lay all the blame on mountain bikers. Rain, Schutz said, is more of a problem than a specific trail user. "It's the water that moves the soil," said Schutz, who has ridden in the Sun Valley area. "Water created the Grand Canyon." But Schutz admitted that some bikers are prone to abusing muddy trails. "We've all grown up and realized that's not good for trails," he said. His group sponsors trail crews and educational events all over the country to help train bikers in trail etiquette.

Catherine doesn't have an exact estimate for how many miles of trails will have to be repaired. She said most trails that exceed a 15 percent grade saw damage. "It wasn't extensive, but it's pretty ferocious where we did have damage," she said.

Catherine doesn't believe the damage was the result of just a few users. Rather, she thinks people failed to practice self-restraint while close to four times the normal amount of rain fell during June. She said people routinely ignored signs put out on local trails asking them to turn around if mud was sticking to their tires or shoes. "The mud coming up behind you is going to be like a roostertail," she said. "This damage just didn't come simply from rainfall." At the Ketchum Ranger Station, officials measured 5.29 inches of rain in June. Normal rainfall for the month is just 1.52 inches.

Damaged trails are also being discovered in Adams Gulch, Fox Creek, Chocolate Gulch and Oregon Gulch. Catherine said they may have to close down some trail segments if they can't find ways to reroute the damaged sections onto sustainable slopes. "It will have to over-winter," Catherine said. "We can't have users go on it following our repairs."

Money to fund the trail work is coming from federal dollars sent to the Ketchum district to help repair damage done by the 2007 Castle Rock Fire. Catherine said that money, coupled with lower-than-expected bids from contractors, has left the district with money for the new repair work that's now needed.

The trail crews—a mix of **Northwest Youth Corps**, a nonprofit youth development and outdoor education organization, and a backcountry crew from the Forest Service—are just the first of many crews that will be working on the district throughout the summer. The agency's crews are acting hoping to reverse the deep trenches laid in the middle of many trails. Where the trail can't be rerouted onto a more suitable slope, the work involves filling the channels with rock and dirt.

Before placing the sign out Greenhorn Gulch, Catherine took a detour over to a section of the Imperial Gulch Trail, a popular path. There, she once more saw deep trenches laid down by a combination of too-early users and watery trails.

Reaching a section of the Imperial Gulch Trail about a half mile above the bottom of Greenhorn, Catherine stopped to check in with two dozen trail workers busily rerouting the trail in a more circuitous manner. Rather than run straight uphill, it will now wind back and forth up the rolling sagebrush hills.

Uphill in a large stand of aspens, chainsaws could be heard cutting a new route through the forest as Catherine instructed the crews on proper trail construction. Looking at the old trail section, she admitted that the old path was not built to current trail standards.

In a way, she said, the damage has provided an opportunity to create a better trail system. "We've got some areas that were going to be a problem regardless," she said.

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