

Grizzly dooms project

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A plan to pave the Montana side of the Gold Center Road is dead in the water.

It wasn't sensitive fish spawning beds along the route that killed the \$12 million Little Joe project, which was funded almost a decade ago and had been on the books for at least that long: A bear shot in central Idaho prompted the US Fish and Wildlife Service to put a stop to the road work, Greg Gifford of the federal highway administration said.

"About two years ago a young grizzly bear was killed in the Clearwater," Mr. Gifford said. "The hypothesis is that it wandered from the Cabinet-Yaak ecosystem into the Clearwater National Forest."

That led biologists to conclude that the St. Joe forest, which lies 100 miles south of the Yaak and just north of the Clearwater, is a travel corridor for grizzlies, which are a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

The Little Joe project is known as the Gold Center Road project locally and called for paving 16 miles of gravel road from Gold Summit in the St. Joe Ranger district to St. Regis, Mont., which lies in the Lolo National Forest.

Three summers ago the work was stalled when the Forest Service and Western Federal Lands Highway Division (WFLHD) butted heads over two culverts.

Forest Service engineers asked that bridges be installed to minimize the impact on fish.

"A lot of it had to do with fish passage," project designer Jack Deucy of WFLHD said. "Our specialists said the present structures pass fish just fine."

The updated plan is 9 years after the project was inception and called for replacing the culverts with bridges to make it easier for fish to pass under the road.

The plan to pave and widen the Little Joe Road was developed in 1997 and funded in 1998 as a cooperative project of the Forest Service, the WFLHD, the Montana transportation department and Mineral County.

The route is touted as a scenic byway for travelers who can enter the St. Joe River corridor directly from I90 at St. Regis.

"It's an excellent avenue to bring tourists into the valley from the Montana side," said Kim Schwanz of Timber Plus, a St. Maries-based economic development organization. "People would love to have that paved."

The highway administration estimates that 93 motorists travel the route daily in the summer, with a projected 3 percent daily increase in the next 20 years.

Another federal agency, which is increasingly at odds with the highway division, prefers a small numbers of travelers on the road to an influx of tourists if the road were paved.

Scott Jackson of the US Fish and Wildlife Service said his agency asked the project either drop the paving plan, or be stopped altogether.

"One of the concerns with the Little Joe Road is that it would create a paved loop from St. Regis to the St. Joe and that would provide easier access into that country," he said. "What we

often see as far as some of these rare species, is that the more human access or ease of access, it puts more people into proximity of those species and you see a direct form of mortality.”

Road kills, illegal or accidental shooting of species such as grizzlies, lynx or wolves, or just the disturbance of the animals is often the result, he said.

“It kind of fragments the habitat and forces the animals farther from the roads, and makes those areas less hospitable to animals going through those areas,” he said.

His agency is willing to endorse the road plan if it is downsized, and doesn’t include pavement, he said.

“We would be willing to keep talking to them if there is a way to improve the road that doesn’t include paving,” he said. “We’ve gone through other projects with them where they did spot improvements, or designed the road to lower standards.”

That defeats the purpose, said Mr. Schwanz, who along with many local promoters expected the newly-paved road to start funneling motorists, including motorcycle groups and day trippers, into the St. Joe River Valley a couple years ago.

He thinks the project, which was also touted to improve the road’s safety as well as the aquatic habitat along the roadway, could be rewritten to specifically address the animal habitat issues.

“It’s really disheartening that something like this gets shot down over the perceived threat of a lawsuit,” he said.

The money has already been re-directed to other projects said Mr. Gifford.

“We were basically saying we can’t throw good money after bad,” he said. “It’s been postponed indefinitely.”

The federal road division plans on repaving the Idaho side of Gold Pass however, which is something that the USFWS doesn’t object to.

Repaving a road has far less environmental impact, than paving and widening a road, Mr. Jackson said.

“When a road goes from gravel to a paved surface it seems to be more of a concern because it increases the traffic a lot more and the ease of travel,” he said. “That is probably why you would want a paved road, but from the fish and wildlife standpoint those circumstances can often lead to adverse effects.”