



Position of Friends of Plumas Wilderness *regarding Connected Communities*

Friends of Plumas Wilderness has been involved with Sierra Buttes Trails Stewardship's Connected Communities (CC) Project since it was first revealed to the public. The project proposes building nearly 600 new miles of single-track motorized trail primarily on the Plumas National Forest, and on the Lassen, Tahoe and Humboldt-Toiyabe national forests. Here, we describe our position, history of involvement, and recommendations.

For over fifty years the mission of Friends of Plumas Wilderness has been to study, explore, and safeguard natural ecosystems where the Sierra and Cascades meet through conservation, advocacy, stewardship, and collaboration.

We are for wild places and the many values they hold, including habitat for wildlife and refuge for people. We feel it is our role to speak for those areas that are largely unroaded, where landscapes are intact and there is high quality wildlife habitat.

FoPW's History with CC

In March of 2021, we wrote a letter of support for the project ([3/1/21 FoPW Letter of Support for Connected Communities.](#))

In April of 2022, working with several partners including Trout Unlimited and Wildlands Network, we submitted [comments and design principle recommendations](#) (see also [cover letter](#)).

We have met with SBTS staff and leadership several times over the past years to share comments, concerns and documents.

In October of 2024 we submitted comments addressing our concerns with the Draft Trails Master Plan and we look forward to reviewing the updated iteration.

Alignment with CC

Our members, staff, and board members are enthusiastic trail users. We understand that recreation can benefit individuals, communities and local economies, and agree that single-track, motorized trails are an appropriate use of our public lands *when located in areas that do not adversely impact other public land values.* (4/11/22 Design Principle Recommendations for the Connected Communities Lost Sierra Route)

We are for the restoration and maintenance of historic and deteriorated trails. We agree that properly maintained trails can serve as fuel breaks or as anchor points for prescribed burns. Given the wildfires of the past several years, maintenance of existing trails is a higher priority than building new trails. We support construction of new trails in carefully-chosen locations that do not degrade natural or cultural values. (ibid.)

We support that the Connected Communities project aims to empower individuals to explore close to home by a trail network with downtown trailheads. This expands access to nature and provides a unique bond between each community and the natural ecosystems at our back doors.

Position regarding CC

Maintain Ecological & Cultural Values: The creation of new motorized routes should not diminish existing ecological and cultural values or opportunities to restore these values where they have previously existed and been lost.

Address Cumulative Effects: The cumulative effects of motorized trail development projects being built across our region over time should be addressed in the environmental review of every proposed motorized trail.

Reduce Negative Wildlife Impacts: Avoid critical habitat and wildlife corridors. A large body of peer-reviewed scientific research has shown recreational development can negatively impact the environment, especially wildlife and wildlife dependent activities like hunting.

Minimize Potential for Wildfire: Additional miles of motorized trails and the increased proliferation of motorized recreation on those trails will increase the likelihood of inadvertent ignition of dry wildland fuels.

Our Efforts Friends of Plumas Wilderness is working with conservation partners, Indigenous groups, and wildlife biologists with state and federal agencies to identify ecological and cultural values in the Northern Sierra. We are developing a wildlife habitat-based mapping tool that can be used to determine where development has minimal impacts on wildlife. The tool can be used to determine where a new single-track motorized trail would have the least impact on wildlife or to aid any forest-level planning effort or development.

We have worked collaboratively with SBTS and relentlessly advocated to ensure the wildland values members of our organization cherish are minimally impacted by the development of the Connected Communities Lost Sierra Route.

Volunteers and staff members of our organization have spent hundreds of hours advocating for the protection of natural and cultural values during the development and implementation of the Connected Communities project. We will resolutely continue to advocate for their recognition and protection.

Our Recommendations for Connected Communities

I. Make conservation one of the goals of the project

The goals of the Connected Communities project are aimed at enhancing local rural economies through recreational development. The Draft Trails Master Plan states “Balancing economic development with environmental preservation is crucial for the continued success of the outdoor recreation economy in the Lost Sierra”.

Friends of Plumas Wilderness recommends that the project include goals specific to the conservation of natural and cultural values. Doing so will provide a better balance between conservation and recreation efforts while protecting the natural values the project depends upon and our members cherish.

II. Avoid or protect areas with unique values. Maintain and protect habitat connectivity and wildlife corridors.

Areas with unique values include places with federal, state and local designations, as well as those identified by the public: Inventoried Roadless Areas, Citizen Inventoried Roadless Areas, Wild & Scenic Rivers, Eligible Wild & Scenic Rivers, Special Interest Areas, Proposed Special Interest Areas,

Research Natural Areas, Candidate Research Natural Areas, Critical Habitat, and corridors connecting habitat. These areas should be avoided.

III. Avoid increasing trail density and further fragmentation of wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors by using existing roads wherever possible

The Lassen, Plumas and Tahoe National Forests have the highest road densities of any Forest Service lands in the nation. The average road density in the Plumas National Forest is over two linear miles per square mile. The PNF has 4,482 miles of roads and trails (Plumas National Forest Motor Vehicle Use Map). The construction of new motorized trails should be offset by the closure of an equal number of miles of existing roads.

Numerous wildlife studies show negative impacts on wildlife and their habitat as road and trail densities increase. Information compiled by the Northern Sierra Wildlife Coalition or other available sources can help delineate areas where trail and recreational development should be avoided, where only existing routes could be utilized, and where new recreation development would be less impactful to wildlife.

IV. Minimize potential for wildfire

Ninety five percent of wildfires in California are human-caused. To minimize the likelihood of human-caused wildfire, fuels should be reduced along existing and newly constructed trails. Furthermore, promotion of trails should include education and outreach related to fire risk posed by trail users.