EXHIBIT 10
DATE 2.11.05
HB HJ18

U.S. Forest Service Informational Testimony on HJ18
Urge Support for Access to Public Lands

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee:

My name is Terry Chute and I represent U.S. Forest Service Northern Regional Forester Gail Kimbell. I want to stress that the Forest Service is not taking a position on this bill. I am here today to provide you with factual information about road closures and motorized access management on National Forest System lands in Montana to assist the committee in making an informed decision.

First, some figures. There are approximately 32,500 miles of road on National Forest System lands in Montana. Of these, 21,500 miles are open for public motorized travel. About 23% of these have some sort of seasonal restriction, typically during wet spring months or to improve seasonal wildlife habitat, such as elk calving or elk habitat security. I want to be clear that we are talking about wheeled vehicles here, as many roads that are closed to wheeled motorized use are available for snowmobile use during winter months.

Road access to public lands is of critical importance to Montana citizens that recreate on their National Forests. Traditional use of these lands is part of our way of life, and adequate motorized road access is integral to these traditional uses. At the same time, thousands of Montana citizens enjoy using areas of the National Forests that are distant from motorized traffic, where they can have a quieter, backcountry experience.

Decisions to close roads are made after extensive public involvement. We are aware of the strong public sentiment and controversy associated with road closures. I can assure you that it is not easy or pleasant to close a road that has provided motorized access to someone's favorite camping, hunting or berry picking area for decades.

However, it is often necessary to reduce the amount of roads to comply with federal environmental laws, most notably the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act. Budget considerations are another factor that often result in decisions to close roads. As Forest Service road maintenance budgets in Montana decline, we are forced to make choices on which roads can and cannot be maintained to meet both public safety and environmental standards. The Forest Service receives about 20% of the funding required to maintain its system at a level that would meet Highway Safety Act and environmental standards. These are the types of choices that county governments and Montana Department of Transportation continually face - where to best invest limited resources.

So, why does the Forest Service restrict motorized use of roads?

- As mentioned, many roads are closed or seasonally restricted because of lack of funding.

- Native surface roads, which constitute the vast majority of roads on National Forests, can be significant sources of sediment to streams. We often lack adequate funding to upgrade roads to meet environmental standards such as sediment input into streams.

- Roads are sometimes closed to minimize the number of redundant or parallel routes that essentially provide access to the same area. Revegetation of unneeded roads is a requirement of the National Forest Management Act.

- In cooperation with MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks, some roads are closed to improve big game security and achieve State wildlife management objectives. These are primarily related to improving big game habitat and providing quality hunting opportunities.

- Motorized use of roads can reduce habitat quality and security for some species listed as threatened or endangered, such as grizzly bear and bull trout.

- Motorized use of roads sometimes conflicts with public desire for non-motorized recreation opportunities.

The Forest Service works hard to offer a balance of access opportunities providing both motorized and non-motorized recreation opportunities. The goal is to provide access that is safe, protects natural resources, and responds to budgetary considerations.

In closing, I would like to note that, in many cases, Forest Service decision space is not whether or not to close roads, but which roads to close and which ones to maintain for safe public access. Travel management decisions are preceded by extensive public involvement opportunities and detailed analysis by professional interdisciplinary teams. Again the Forest Service takes these decisions seriously. We would like to accommodate the wishes of all, but given conflicting social desires, environmental considerations and declining budgets that is simply not possible.

Thank you for your time and attention. I am available to answer questions and can provide you with further information at your request.

Terry A. Chute
U.S. Forest Service – Montana Capital City Coordinator
(406) 444-5516