

**File Code:** 2320**Date:** June 10, 2019**Route To:****Subject:** Approval for Limited Chainsaw Use to Clear Trails in Wilderness**To:** Forest Supervisors, San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests

This further amends my letter of May 7, 2019, as previously amended by my letter of May 31, 2019, which authorized temporary and limited use of chainsaws in the South San Juan and Weminuche Wilderness areas to clear trail obstructions. As indicated in my May 31 letter, snowpack conditions in these two wilderness areas are highly unusual for this time of year, ranging from 500% to more than 700% of normal as of May 30. Reports by trail crews and scouts over the past week indicate that access into the backcountry to perform trail maintenance work will need to be delayed even further than initially forecasted. Avalanches have blocked many trails and those trails are unlikely to be accessible until late in the year. Given these unexpected and extraordinary conditions, it is unlikely that we could access our wilderness trails to begin work by July 8, and therefore it is also unlikely that we would realize any substantial benefit from the use of chainsaws to clear trail obstructions during the period authorized by my May 31 letter.

Avalanches and heavy snowpack have created changed conditions. We expect significant resource damage to have occurred, more so than what was anticipated from the time of my original and amended decisions, which now must be further addressed. Therefore, we will reassess the overall needs, considering these changed conditions, as related to wilderness and non-wilderness trail impacts. I am rescinding the approval to use chainsaws that was conveyed in my May 7 letter, as amended by my May 31 letter, until our assessed needs are completed.

It is expected that trail clearing with non-motorized equipment and trail reconnaissance will proceed to the extent feasible, with priority being given to safety, and reduction of the potential for resource damage and impairment of wilderness values. Some elements of my May 7 decision will proceed as planned. Specifically:

1. Identify and maintain a record of trail segments encountered during maintenance activities that meet the “jackstraw” standard of 40 or more downed or leaning trees per mile obstructing the trail route, particularly those that are not able to be cleared with non-motorized equipment this year.
2. Study and report on the efficiency of using non-motorized saws to clear trails in the wilderness; and
3. Study and report on the efficiency of using chainsaws to clear trails outside of wilderness, and how those efficiencies would be affected by lack of proximity to motor vehicle travel routes that are typical in wilderness.



In addition, publicity surrounding this proposal has elicited interest from several new sources in providing volunteer and other labor to perform trail clearing with non-motorized equipment. Both Forests should fully explore these offers to determine if they may in fact provide viable sources of skilled labor that would reduce the need to perform trail maintenance with chainsaws in the future.

Rescinding my May 7 and May 31 approvals for the limited use of chainsaws in the Weminuche and South San Juan Wilderness does not affect any other approvals for the use of motorized equipment in wilderness. If you have questions or need follow-up information, contact Recreation, Lands and Minerals Deputy Director Jason Robertson at Jason.d.robertson@usda.gov or 303-275-5470.



for BRIAN FEREBEE
Regional Forester

cc: Jason Robertson