

Vision for the future

Plan emphasizes collaboration in Sawtooth National Recreation Area

By Ariel Hansen
Times-News writer, June 23, 2009

STANLEY - The Sawtooth National Recreation Area is Magic Valley's back yard. It's where we go to mountain bike, hike, ride off-road vehicles, camp, cross-country ski, or just drive around and ogle the scenery.

Created in 1972 by an act of Congress as part of the Sawtooth National Forest, it encompasses 756,000 acres in and around the Stanley Basin, including thousands of miles of trails and 700 developed campsites. It also includes habitat for endangered species, private property, state lands that can be used for anything from gravel pits to housing developments, and an economic climate shifting from ranching to tourism. Between those many uses and those who wish to use and protect the SNRA, the region has been missing a cohesive, forward-looking vision.

In 2005, the leaders of The Sawtooth Society and local Forest Service got together to fix that. Through a series of workshops with several dozen representatives of major interest groups and two rounds of public forums, a plan was developed in 2006 outlining major goals and challenges facing the SNRA. Three years later, organizers can point to concrete accomplishments as well as projects currently underway as part of Sawtooth Vision 20/20.

"It's a place we want to take care of, and this document brought these stakeholders together with a shared vision," said Sara Baldwin, Recreation Area Ranger for the SNRA. "Whatever your interest area is, we can find something for you to get excited about this. The objective is, and I think people really can, make a difference here." Baldwin said she is excited that the Vision 20/20 plan didn't end up dusty on a shelf somewhere, that organizations continue to refer to it when planning projects and assessing priorities. The workshop group met again last month to review what had been accomplished since 2006, and nearly all the original organizations sent representatives.

Among the projects discussed at that meeting were the Tamarack Exchange, which would swap federal land elsewhere for state parcels in critical areas, such as the Fourth of July parcel in the Stanley Basin; acquisition of funds to buy conservation easements on several parcels in the SNRA; restoration of a historic ice house on Stanley Museum property and the Doc Day Cabin; increased year-round access on Idaho Highway 21 from Boise to Stanley; restoration of salmon habitat along the banks of the Salmon River at the Arrow A Ranch; and the creation of new authorized ATV trails along with closure of user-created trails near Pole Creek.

Each of these projects involved several organizations in addition to the Sawtooth Society and Forest Service, showing how important collaboration is in enacting the Vision 20/20 plan. "People were willing to put all their cards on the table and have some meaningful dialogue," said Gary O'Malley, executive director of The Sawtooth Society. He said he is not aware of any organizations that oppose Vision 20/20 - even if specific agendas differ between them, they agree on the shared vision statement. Getting there wasn't easy.

"There are some in each group that basically think the others should have no rights in the SNRA. To get those convergent groups to come to some consensus was a challenge on some of the issues," said Paul Hill, incoming president of The Sawtooth Society. "At the end of the day, the good part is people from both sides were in the room and felt they had their say, and they buy in and support it." With parts of the plan ready for action this year, and other parts that need continual work for the next decade or two, Vision 20/20 is in need of volunteers from every group that uses the SNRA.

"The biggest challenges have been simply resources. ... If we can help provide resources, guidance, support, and let (other organizations) take the lead on (each) issue, we'll get much further than if The Sawtooth Society is trying to lead all those efforts," Hill said. "We would love to see more groups involved, particularly from Twin Falls, because they're so active in the area."

The Forest Service faces the same problem. With many goals but few resources, the agency can't accomplish everything itself. "The Forest Service is often looked to to solve all the problems, but we can't do it alone," Baldwin said. She said people sometimes don't realize that maintaining the vistas and recreation opportunities that have been in place for decades requires constant attention and action. "It's not so much what you see, it's what you don't see. And that takes a lot of work, to protect those views."

With the guidance of Vision 20/20, it has been easier for organizations to align their activities with the priorities the plan set. And when small goals are accomplished, they can more easily be seen as steps along the path toward the ultimate vision.

"This isn't just a good thing, it's a necessity," Baldwin said. "If we want the SNRA to stay a special place, it will take hard work, and we need people to roll up their sleeves."

Ariel Hansen may be reached at 208-788-3475 or ahansen@magicvalley.com.

Sawtooth Vision 20/20's Vision Statement

"The Sawtooth National Recreation Area is a magnificent place with breathtaking views, majestic mountains, open spaces, clear skies, dark nights, quiet places, clean air and waters, and abundant native fish and wildlife. Visitors and residents cherish their experiences, including opportunities for inspiration, solitude, silence, diverse recreational challenges, and a sense of history in a rustic, Western setting.

The Sawtooth National Recreation Area showcases effective stewardship, where all stakeholders collaborate to protect the scenic, historic, pastoral and natural values, diverse native fish and wildlife, and promote responsible recreation in this unique setting. Sustainable natural ecosystems and local communities thrive. Managers, visitors and residents embrace the special nature of the landscape and are enriched by their experiences."

Source: Sawtooth Vision 20/20: Shared Strategies for the Future of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, December 2006.

Get Involved

To find out how to volunteer based on your specific area of interest, contact:

- Carol Cole, Sawtooth National Forest partnership and volunteer coordinator, 208-727-5007 or cjcole@fs.fed.us.
- Sawtooth Society, 208-387-0852 or sawtoothsociety@sawtoothsociety.org.

Visit www.sawtoothsociety.org for information about Sawtooth Vision 20/20, what has been accomplished and what is being planned.

Upcoming Participation Opportunities

Open house for The Sawtooth Society at Smiley Creek, 6 p.m. Thursday.

Beer, wine and light appetizers will be provided at this opportunity to learn about The Sawtooth Society and its projects. Cost is free. Smiley Creek Lodge, 16546 N. Highway 75, Sawtooth City, 208-774-3547.

The Sawtooth Society's 2009 Sagebrush Soiree, 6-10 p.m. Aug. 1. This fundraiser features cocktails, silent auction, dinner, raffle, live auction and rolling bid. \$200 per person. Hosted at the Goat Creek Ranch in Stanley. For required reservations and address call 208-387-0852. Busing is available for Wood River Valley residents.