

Direct and Indirect Effects of Paving Flathead County Road 486 Executive Summary

In the fast-changing Flathead County, the North Fork Valley remains “what Montana was” — beautiful, rugged and rich. The fate of Flathead County Road 486, the “North Fork Road,” has been debated for decades.

Paving the road would require a significant expenditure of tax dollars. To make wise choices, decision-makers must analyze both costs and benefits. This paper aims to identify some of the effects of paving the North Fork Road on both the human and natural environment.

The portion of the North Fork of the Flathead Valley in question is home to about 100 year-round residents. Roughly 60 miles of the road serving this valley is gravel. The road serves no incorporated towns and dead-ends at the Canadian border. The valley is known for its world-class wildlife habitat, its “Wild and Scenic” river and access to Glacier National Park and Flathead National Forest.

A review of scientific literature around road development suggests:

- Paving will bring more cars, moving faster. This will lead to increased wildlife collisions and make collisions worse. The North Fork is home for many large wild mammals that frequent the valley floor, including moose and elk, and collisions with these animals would be a significant hazard.
- Paving the road will trigger increased development and promote year-round “commuters” up the North Fork. This increases pressure on public infrastructure such as roads, police services and water quality. More development in this fire-prone forest also greatly increases the cost and danger of fighting wildfires. Development erodes wildlife habitat and the sense of solitude the North Fork is known for.
- Asphalt raises concerns about runoff into waterways. Paved roads continue to be a source of chemical pollutants long after construction is complete. Contaminants known to run off of paved roads include heavy metals and cancer-causing polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs.)
- Increasing the number of people in the North Fork will increase the spread of weeds and increase the likelihood of visitors igniting forest fires during summer droughts.
- There are methods of controlling dust short of pavement that should be examined carefully. Maintaining low driving speeds also reduces dust.

Paving a road triggers broad changes well beyond the road surface itself. Paving the North Fork Road would be a major step in forever changing the uncrowded, beautiful and natural character of this special valley. In particular, paving will impact the clean water and world-class wildlife that makes the North Fork unique in North America. Once those values are lost, they are difficult, if not impossible, to recover. Since tax dollars are limited, it’s only responsible that Flathead County spend our money in places and ways that do the most good for the most people.