

E-bikes on trails?

Sierra Club establishes a new policy

*by Vicky Hoover and Jim Catlin,
Recreation Issues Team*

E-bikes—bicycles powered by electric motors—seem to be prevalent all around us as they have gained rapid popularity. With an electric motorized bicycle, you can go faster, farther, and higher. E-bikes are claimed to “do everything you want but better.”

E-bikes now occupy a world with walkers, cars, buses, bicyclists, horses, and wildlife. Great for urban transportation, but in wild backcountry places, this can lead to serious conflicts and impacts.

This rise of e-bikes challenged the Sierra Club to see how to accommodate this new form of travel and still meet our mission to protect the environment and help people get out into nature. In the past year, Club volunteers and leaders have discussed how to address this new challenge. The Recreation Issues Sub Team of the national Wildlands Team led the revision process for our Off-road Use of Bicycles and our Off-road Use of Motorized Vehicles policies. In May 2022, the Sierra Club’s Board of Directors adopted the new policies recommended by the recreation team.

The new policy recognizes the benefits of electric motorized bicycles and promotes their use in urban and developed areas. This policy makes clear that for use on trails on public lands, all e-bikes must be considered and managed as motorized vehicles. In wildlands where motorized use is prohibited, e-bike use should also be prohibited.

Photo by Deb Lastowka, National Renewable Energy Laboratory



Industry advocacy

When e-bikes first appeared, electric motorized bicycles had to meet the requirements for motorcycles and mopeds. Because these limitations were forecast to hurt sales, e-bike distributors and manufacturers formed an organization to change federal and state laws and policies to favor e-bikes. PeopleForBikes Coalition began campaigning to convince the public that electric motorized bikes should go everywhere conventional bicycles go. Today this organization, PeopleForBikes Coalition, has 27 full time employees and a budget of \$3.7 million a year.

To increase e-bike access, the industry invented a three-tier class system that ranks e-bikes as Class 1, 2, and 3. Class 1 e-bikes were claimed to be similar to traditional bicycles, operated when pedaled, and could go no faster than 20 miles per hour. A conventional bicyclist typically goes just over 10 miles per hour. Class 2 and 3 e-bikes are faster, heavier, and more powerful.

There is a practical problem with the claim that Class 1 e-bikes should be allowed where bicycles are allowed. It is not physically possible for a bicyclist or an enforcement officer to look at an e-bike and determine its “class.” There is no distinctive marking. Many e-bike models can be configured to be either Class 1, 2, or 3 and look identical. Also, it is easy for e-bike owners to modify the bike to increase power and speed.

The artificial e-bike classification system is an e-bike industry legislative lobbying ploy aiming to expand use of electric motorized bikes. The distinction is unenforceable by a land manager, and thus, if allowed, would open any non-motorized trail to any motorized bike.

PeopleForBikes Coalition has been very successful. 43 states have passed e-bike legislation that adopts their recommendations.

30x30, wildlife, hikers, and equestrians

Human recreation disturbs wildlife, resulting in harm to animals’ behavior and health, and causes wildlife to avoid otherwise suitable habitat. Studies have shown that because e-bikes go faster and further, they impact some wildlife more than hikers, cyclists, and horseback riders.

As part of the Club’s mission to protect wild places, we need to protect some quiet hiking and horseback trails from vehicles.

There is growing pressure to use more vehicles for recreation, which conflicts with a critical need to protect biodiversity and preserve wildlands values. In response to climate change and the rapid loss of biodiversity, the Club champions the 30x30 campaign to protect 30% of natural habitat by 2030. Allowing e-bikes in candidate wilderness areas may prevent achieving 30X30 goals. Motorized use may disqualify candidate natural areas for federal wilderness designation.

E-bikes are here and may benefit many. It will be our challenge to promote these and still respect others on trails and, of course, protect wild lands.