

New Federal Rule To Limit Vehicle Access to Forests Public Input Critical To Final Decisions

By Dave Menicucci, Freelance Writer

Just to the west of Los Alamos lies one of the most enchanting recreational areas in the country, the Jemez mountains. Laden with breathtaking vistas, world class hunting and fishing, intriguing archeological sites, and a host of trails for hiking, biking and skiing, this region attracts visitors from around the world. But this forested area, like all others throughout the country, is under attack on four fronts including *fire and fuel*, *invasive species*, *loss of open space* and *unmanaged recreation*.

While the USDA Forest Service (FS) has programs to mitigate these threats, unmanaged recreation, especially relating to off-highway vehicles (OHV), is a particularly vexing problem. These vehicles are growing ever more popular and mountainous areas with a mixture of hills, cliffs, trees, and rocks provide a variety of challenging riding opportunities for enthusiasts.

Modern OHVs, especially the small, four wheeled, single seat models have virtually no bounds and can traverse hazardous terrain that was previously negotiated only on foot. But when these vehicles are free-wheeling through the forest they can destroy undergrowth leading to erosion, ruin habitat, and scatter wildlife.



Photo downloaded from the internet showing OHV damage

Proper use of OHVs, however, can enhance pleasurable experiences in the forests by permitting visits to remote areas. They can also bring older and disabled folks into prime recreational areas that would otherwise be impossible for them to access.

The Forest Service has acknowledged that OHV use in the national forests is legitimate and appropriate if they are carefully managed. That is why they are implementing a new rule for OHV use.

This rule, entitled “Travel Management: Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use,” was announced in the Federal Register in November, 2005. It mandates that the FS designate specific routes in the national forest

system for OHVs use as well as those where they are disallowed.

It is the prospect of these road restrictions that has generated concern. Some believe that too many forest roads are already closed to motor vehicles and that some of these closures effectively discriminate against older and partially disabled residents.

Bill Black, a local fly fisherman, is troubled by the closure of a forest road leading to a quality catch and release stream just outside the northwest corner of the Valles Caldera National Preserve. “The road is perfectly passable in my 4-wheel drive truck,” he says, “but now I have to hike a mile with a 600 foot elevation drop to get to the stream. I’m getting too old for that.”

Others, particularly environmentalists, have noted certain meadows that have been severely damaged by motor vehicles and have recommended closing the access roads.

“This is exactly the kind of information that we need to help us make our decisions,” says Rob Potts, Forest Planner for the Santa Fe National Forest. “We need people to tell us which roads need free access, which should be restricted, and why.” He added that *specificity* is principally important. “Telling us that we ‘should shut down all the roads’ is not particularly useful.”

The Forest Service’s implementation plan can be summarized as a series of steps: 1) Identify the roads currently in use. 2) Assemble relevant data and information, 3) Analyze the existing road system, 4) Designate appropriate vehicle use for the roads, 5) Publish a map, and 6) Implement the plan.

The first step is essentially complete. “We are moving on,” says Rob, “and we are seeking public input.” The FS will soon announce a series of workshops where the public will be invited to review the situation. The announcement will be placed in local papers and at the Santa Fe National Forest Web site <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/>.



View of quality fishing waters from the point where the Forest Service has closed the access road.

Tom Dwyer, FS Southwest Regional director, says that “public partnerships are essential.” With the steadily declining size of the FS it is a fundamental realization that the plan’s success depends on public cooperation. Both Rob and Tom emphasized that the FS is interested in different views and new ideas for meeting the intent of the rule.

The Controlled Access program operated by the Middle Rio Grand Conservancy District (MRGCD) might be a model for the FS. Since 1995 the district has gated all the roads along the bosque between Albuquerque and Bernardo. However, by paying an annual fee along with training, people are allowed to enter the area with motor vehicles. Victor Hale, director of the MRGCD’s program says that the fees pay for the program, the users police themselves, and people still have motorized access to the bosque area for activities such as fishing or photography.

Some groups, such as the Sierra Club and various 4-wheel drive clubs have been actively participating with the FS for over a year. Others, such as hikers, hunters, fishermen, and bikers have been relatively quiescent. Since this process is so carefully planned around public input, once the roads have been designated and the rule is implemented, changes will be difficult. So now is the time for interested individuals to stand and be counted in the process.

More information is located at the Santa Fe National Forest web site and the FS southwest region site <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/projects/travel-mgt/index.shtml>. Rob Potts can be reached at 505-438-7829.

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