

Title: Planned Forest Road Closures Pose Unforeseen Hardships: Needs of older sportsmen and women, families with young children, handicapped ignored

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Standing on a mountain ridge, Bill Black, an older fisherman, pointed to a distant fishing stream and said "The Forest Service has cut me off from those quality waters by closing a perfectly fine access road." The road in question is an eastern spur off of Forest Service 144 near the northwest corner of the Valles Caldera. He explained that his bad knee will not allow him to walk a steep road leading to the stream. "I can get there in my truck, but not walking," he said.

Things might get worse for Black and others who depend on vehicles to transport them to highly desirable fishing, hunting and recreational areas in the forest. Under the proposed Travel Management Plan, the Forest Service plans to permanently close about 53% of all existing forest roads in the Santa Fe National Forest. One proposed closure is a steep road that Black uses to reach a cherished fishing area on the upper Rio Cebolla.

Travel Management may indeed disproportionately affect certain groups. Tony Louderbough, is a certified geriatrics expert and a manager in the state's Department of Aging and Long-term Services. Speaking for himself he expressed concern that elders and handicapped might encounter restricted access to their public lands. "When you close a road, it has almost no effect on young people. They walk in," he said. "But it could shut out a senior citizen. Bill Black is a case in point."

Other less mobile groups might also be affected. Anne VanArsdall, a grandmother, questioned whether "families with small children might also be restricted. You can't hike very far with children," she said.

Jeff Boggs, a traditional motorized camper, derided the plan. "People who hike into the forest with a backpack and pup tent will not be affected," he said. "But my wife and I use our truck camper." Under the plan we will lose a majority of our remote motor camping areas."

Louderbough said that while he has not studied the plan in detail, so far he has seen no recognition of the impact to senior, handicap, or others who depend solely on vehicles to enjoy remote areas. He believes that some kind of selective entry system might be appropriate.

The Middle Rio Grand Conservancy District operates a program that could be a model for selective senior/handicap access to certain publicly closed areas. All the roads along the bosque between Albuquerque and Bernardo are gated. However, people can purchase an entry permit. Victor Hale, the program director, said that the fees pay for the program, users self-police, and people have access. "We'd share information with the Forest Service," he said.

Michael Frazier, staff officer with the Forest Service, acknowledged that the Travel Management rule does not prohibit a selective entry system, but said that "fees for access to large areas are generally resisted." "But we will discuss the idea," he quickly added.

The US Forest Service and a host of proponents argue that road closures are essential to preserve the forest resources for the future. Vehicles, especially those designed for off-highway use, are one of the major threats to the forests identified by the Federal Government. Others include fire, invasive species, and loss of habitat.

The Travel Management plan implements a rule announced in the Federal Register in November, 2005, that mandates the designation of specific vehicular routes in the forests. A primary objective, according to Frazier is to “eliminate travel by off-highway vehicles beyond the designated system,” a practice that is presently not regulated by law.

Mark Werkmeister, President of the New Mexico Off Highway Vehicle Alliance and Director of Environmental Affairs for the New Mexico 4 Wheelers, sees it differently. “The motorized recreation community agrees that cross country travel should be eliminated and that ban enforced but the Forest Service should retain the historic road and trail systems for the benefit of the public,” he said.

“Road density” is the reason for closing roads, countered Cyndi Tuell, a manager with the Center for Biodiversity in Tucson. She explained that “the road density in Santa Fe National Forest is currently well beyond the Center’s recommended limit for protecting the forest the environment and wildlife habitats.” “We suggest one mile of road for every square mile of land area,” she said.

Frazier assuredly said that the closures “should not affect most people because many of those roads are redundant. People will still be able to get to their hiking or fishing spots.”

However, not everyone uses the roads simply for transportation to a recreational spot. Werkmeister explained that the organizations he represents use the forest roads themselves for recreation. “When they close a road, they eliminate a recreational opportunity for us,” he said. “It is analogous to having a favored hiking trail closed.” He added that “they are actually going to close 68% of the roads that our members have been using responsibly for over 50 years.” His closure estimate is higher than the Forest Service’s because not all forest roads are listed in the government’s inventory. Werkmeister said emphatically that his group “stays on the existing routes” and actually maintains them with organized maintenance efforts.

Dale Higginbotham, a motorcyclist who has ridden Observed Trails in the Santa Fe forest for the past 34 years, added that his group rides slowly “over obstacles with minimal environmental impact.” “Still,” he said, “we’ve lost 90% of our riding area and possibly more to come, even though motorcycles are acknowledged as a legitimate use.”

Before making the closure recommendations, the Forest Service conducted an extensive 18-month effort to elicit and integrate public input. Frazier said that they “have held dozens of public meetings” seeking comment. “We’ll talk with anyone, anytime, on any subject about this plan,” he said forcefully.

Even though the comment period for this phase of the plan closed on September 2, Frazier assuredly said that they “are still listening.” He cautioned, however, that not everyone is going to get everything they want. He emphasized that “changes are essential to protect the resources,” which is the Forest Service’s main responsibility.

Black, however, is dubious about anyone “listening.” He said his complaints about access issues are frequently met with comments about “sacrifices.” “It is easy to sacrifice someone else’s fishing spot,” he said.

Many well-known groups strongly support Travel Management. Bryan Bird, Public Land Director for WildEarth Guardians, a national environmental group, said they support “reasonable access to all open areas of the forest,” but “unbridled use of off-highway vehicles is a threat and the plan is fair, first step to control them. Greg McReynolds, of Trout Unlimited, stated that the “Forest Service has done a fantastic job of retaining routes for recreational access while reducing habitat damaging user-created routes.”

Jeremy Vesbach, representing the NM Wildlife Federation, added that the plan will improve hunting based on a study by the NM Game and Fish Department that showed dramatically increased hunting success in areas with lower road densities.

All parties have concerns that the plan will fail because it might be unenforceable. The Forest Service’s budget is stretched thin due to funding cuts and fire management. Enforcement, especially of an unpopular plan, could be extremely difficult.

Where enforcement measures haven't worked well, Tuell believes in strong action. “Take the violator’s vehicle, especially for repeat offenders,” she proposed. Others, such as Werkmeister, believe “it won’t work unless people support the plan, educate their peers, and cooperate with law enforcement.”

Tom Ribe, a conservationist, believes that the plan is completely unenforceable unless smaller, all-terrain vehicles (less than 50” in width) are banned. He explained that these vehicles often drive off the roads, damage habitat, destroy watersheds, and are nearly impossible to catch. “The Forest Service has no ability in the current scheme to control this plague,” he said.

More information about Travel Management for the Santa Fe National Forest can be obtained by visiting the Forest Service office at 1474 Rodeo Road in Santa Fe. Ranger Stations also have maps of the proposed plan and information. A hotline is monitored constantly at 505-438-7840. Complete information, including the map of proposed road closures, can be downloaded from this website:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/travelmgt/index.html>