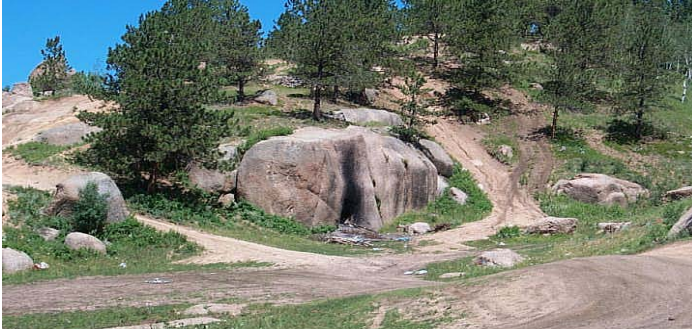


Off-Road Vehicles

Unmanaged, poorly managed, and damaging off-road vehicle use has become a major problem in National Parks, Forests, Monuments, and other public lands.

Off-road vehicles (also known as off-highway vehicles) are any motorized vehicle designed for or capable of cross-country travel on or immediately over land, water, sand, snow, ice, marsh,



Illegal routes created by off-road vehicles in the Pike San Isabel National Forest (CO).
Photo credit: Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance

swampland, or other natural terrain. Dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles, jeeps, snowmobiles, jet skis (also known as personal watercraft), and dune buggies are the most common types of off-road vehicles. In the last 30 years, increasing damage caused by off-road vehicles on public lands and waterways has alarmed Presidents and agency heads.

In 1972, President Nixon began an Executive Order with the following statement:

An estimated 5 million off-road recreational vehicles—motorcycles, minibikes, trail bikes, snowmobiles, dune buggies, all-terrain vehicles, and others—are in use in the United States today, and their popularity continues to increase rapidly. The widespread use of such vehicles on the public lands—often for legitimate purposes but also in frequent conflict with wise land and resource management practices, environmental values, and other types of recreational activity—has demonstrated the need for a unified federal policy toward the use of such vehicles on the public lands.

In April 2003, Forest Service Chief Bosworth described expanding damage due to off-road vehicle use as follows:

For example, the Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana has more than a thousand unplanned roads and trails reaching for almost 650 miles. That's pretty typical for a lot of national forests, and it's only going to get worse.

General Off-Road Vehicle Use

Off-road vehicle users make up a small portion of visitors to federal public lands. In 2005, at a House Resources subcommittee hearing, Chief Bosworth reported that 95 percent of visitors to National Forests and Grasslands per year do not use off-road vehicles (211 million visitors with only roughly 12 million on off-road vehicles). Although these machines are less popular than other forms of recreation, their speed, power, and ability to go long distances, coupled with poor management, have caused widespread damage to National Forests, Bureau of Land Management lands, National Parks, and Wildlife Refuges.

Off-Road Vehicle Use on Public Lands

The National Park Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management are guided by two Executive Orders regarding off-road vehicle use (E.O. 11644, 11989). The Executive Orders have three major principles for designating and managing areas for off-road vehicle use: protect the resources of those lands, promote the safety of all users of those lands, and minimize conflicts among the various uses of those lands. The orders require each agency to develop regulations and policies while recognizing off-road vehicles are prohibited from Wilderness Areas and should be more carefully scrutinized in National Parks, Wildlife Refuges, and Game Ranges.



Off-road vehicle damage in the Pike San Isabel National Forest (CO). Photo credit: Southern Rockies Conservation Alliance



Area in the White River National Forest that has become an illegal off-road vehicle race track. Photo credit: Aaron Clark

Each agency has completed regulations and policies on off-road vehicles. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management must designate trails and areas where off-road vehicles are allowed. In many cases, the agencies prepare travel plans that indicate where street-legal vehicles and recreational off-road vehicles are allowed. The Park Service requires each unit to complete a regulation before allowing snowmobile, jet ski, or other off-road vehicle use. The Wildlife Refuge System prepares compatibility and appropriate-use plans that designate areas and routes for off-road vehicle use.

Travel Planning: The Forest Service and BLM's Current Efforts

As a first step toward getting unmanaged off-road vehicle use under control, both agencies proclaimed their intent to finally transition off-road vehicle use from "going anywhere" to designating roads and motorized trails. In 2001, the BLM began a west-wide planning effort that in many places such as eastern Oregon and southern Utah includes designating roads and motorized trails. In 2001 and 2005 the Forest Service revised its regulations, making a commitment to identify its minimum road system for public and private use as well as designate roads and trails for off-road vehicle use by 2010 in all National Forests and Grasslands, respectively.

The Wilderness Society performed its own informal survey in 2006, which indicated that approximately 80 comprehensive BLM travel management plans have been completed or are close to completion. However, other than plans for units of the National Landscape Conservation System, most of these travel plans are for small portions of different planning areas, such as individual areas of critical environmental concern or special recreation management areas. As a result, while many travel management plans have been completed, many more are still needed to address the vast acreage managed by the BLM.

The Forest Service is preparing plans for each of the 155 National Forests and 20 Grasslands.

Unfortunately, many of the current travel planning efforts are not addressing current damage and conflicts among users that are caused by poorly managed off-road vehicle use. These plans designate routes ignoring the requirements set in the Nixon Executive Order for identifying routes. Therefore, many road and motorized trail designations may increase conflicts among visitors, damage natural and cultural resources and wildlife habitat, interfere with compliance with applicable laws and policies, and increase costs of management, maintenance, and enforcement.

The Forest Service and BLM efforts have several shortcomings that can be overcome and must be corrected in order to ensure adequate travel planning and management.

1. Bloated, Dense Road and Motorized Trail Systems

Although the agencies are moving from millions of acres essentially open for off-road driving toward a much more limited system of designated road and motorized trails, they are not moving in the direction of ecologically sustainable road and motorized trail networks. Instead, they are designating large, unmanageable, and damaging route systems. If more Forest Service ranger districts and BLM field offices continue this trend, these initiatives to get off-road vehicle use under control will be missed opportunities. For instance, in the Plumas National Forest travel plan in California, the agency manages approximately 4,150 miles of roads and 102 miles of motorized trails. Its latest proposal adds 375 miles of existing unauthorized routes to the current system of motorized trails.

2. Failure to Protect and Preserve Wild Lands and Cultural Sites

There are certain areas where natural and cultural resource values must be given special consideration in travel planning, including heightened protection from the impacts of off-road vehicles. Agencies have a duty to protect cultural sites, rivers and streams, wildlife migration corridors, and other sensitive lands and should consider designating these areas for walking trails and other lower-impact recreation. For instance, the Utah Resource Management and Travel Plans include more than five million acres of proposed Wilderness, including 1.8 million acres of Wilderness Study Areas (WSA). The plans propose to designate motorized vehicle routes throughout the WSAs and 92% of lands outside WSAs that the BLM has recognized as having wilderness characteristics. .

3. Fiscally Irresponsible Road and Motorized Trail Networks that Agencies Cannot Afford to Maintain, Monitor, or Enforce

Roads and motorized trails are expensive to construct and maintain whether they are asphalt, gravel, or dirt. The BLM and Forest Service are designating road and motorized trail systems that are fiscally unrealistic based on available and projected funding for construction, maintenance, monitoring, and enforcement. Even where minimal construction or maintenance is required (as is the case for some routes on BLM lands), more routes mean more monitoring to ensure that they are not causing unacceptable damage and enforcement problems.

One acknowledgment of this funding shortfall is in the Cibola National Forest that includes the Sandia Mountains, a popular place to visit just east of Albuquerque, New Mexico. This area prepared a travel analysis that included the following statement: *“But based on road maintenance funding received over the previous five years the Cibola N.F. can afford to fully maintain only about 31% of the existing system.”*

4. Agencies are Not Adequately Planning for Recreation Including Hiking, Horseback Riding, Hunting, and Fishing

The majority of Americans who visit National Forests and BLM lands do so to experience nature, view wildlife, hike, hunt, or fish. They enjoy a break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life by seeking out fresh air, solitude, and natural scenery. The BLM and the Forest Service are required to preserve these experiences when identifying roads and motorized trails for off-road vehicle use. Unfortunately, the agencies are proposing road and motorized trail systems that do not take into account other visitor and recreation needs. In the Bangs Canyon Travel Management Plan in Colorado, the BLM agreed with Colorado citizens that large portions of this area had wilderness characteristics. However, the travel management plan designated a motorized trail through the area.

Recommendations to Move in the Right Direction

The BLM and Forest Service can make significant improvements to their travel planning processes. We recommend:

- Basing travel planning on the precept that motorized use is only appropriate where it will not damage natural and cultural resources and values;
- Planning for all recreationists. Motorized vehicles have a place on public lands but it should be separate from the places the majority of visitors use;
- Applying stricter protective standards for areas identified for their conservation values; and
- Evaluating financial, law enforcement, and other resources needed to manage proposed travel networks, and ensuring that the systems are sized to be commensurate with available resources.

The solutions identified above can result in significant improvements in public land stewardship—protecting natural and cultural resources, while providing quality recreation experiences for both motorized and traditional recreationists. We urge Congress to review the serious risks associated with current travel planning and provide direction to conduct travel planning that designates appropriate travel systems.



September 2002



May 2004



September 2004

Photos of an area in the Wasatch-Cache National Forest (UT) that has sustained damage due to off-road vehicle use. Over time, the route's condition has worsened.

Photo credits – Dan Schroeder, Ogden Sierra Club

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