

Forests to ban off-road driving

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The long-delayed effort to limit the environmental damage done by off-road vehicles in Rim Country will trigger a report on closing a portion of the 1,000 miles of dirt roads in the Payson Ranger District of the Tonto National Forest.

"We're trying to get a handle on cross-country travel," said Ed Armenta, the head ranger for the district. "Right now it's unmanaged, unregulated and you've got people going anywhere they feel like — which has a tremendous impact."

The proliferation of quads and other vehicles that can take off cross country prompted the National Forest Service to order all the forests to come up with "travel management plans." The plans will bar cross-country motorized travel and determine which dirt roads and trails to leave open.

Other forests in the region, including the White Mountain-based Apache Sitgreaves, have already released proposed plans. The

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PAYSON ROUNDUP **LOCAL** TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2009

Cross-country travel faces Payson Ranger District ban

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Apache Sitgreaves plan calls for closing half the existing dirt roads, especially those in sensitive wildlife habitats or roads already heavily eroded — which can have a serious impact on streams, meadows and other sensitive habitats.

Armenta said the Payson and Young ranger districts should release their plans within about a month. He said the 400,000-acre Payson district has about 927 miles of formal roads, plus maybe three times as many miles of "user created" trails, spawned by quads that have simply taken off through the forest.

"Right now we're just trying to get a handle on which ones actually do pose a problem. There are so many out there, we had to do a comprehensive evaluation."

He said the district will eventually ban cross-country travel and shut down many of the informally created paths, but probably won't close many of existing roads that wander throughout the district. The only portion of the forest not readily accessible by one of the established dirt roads is the terrain along the base of the Mogollon Rim, which is so steep and cut by streams and canyons that even quads can't roam freely.

The closure of the user-created trails will likely have the biggest impact and probably draw the most public comment, he said.

Armenta said "there are a lot of user-created roads out there that we don't even know exist. So I think there will be a significant impact on travelers in that respect. We haven't really quantified how many of those roads are out there — it's spaghetti in places."

The district hopes to release a map of the potential road closures sometime in the next

month, and then hold a series of public hearings on the plan. The district hopes to finalize its plan by the end of the year.

"There's a significant number of folks out there that have ATVs (All-Terrain Vehicles). Placing limits on those may be painful for some of them."

The district's travel management plan would also affect Payson's effort to build a trails system that would become a major draw for tourists. Payson Mayor Kenny Evans has said the town hopes some of the road closures might end up contributing to a network of nonmotorized trails the town hopes to create.

For instance, the International Mountain Biking Association recently made a presentation before tourism officials in Payson, pushing for the creation of high-quality, "single-track," nonmotorized trails for bikes, hikers and horses. Other towns like Show Low, Sedona, Tucson and even Black Canyon City have cashed in on adventure tourism by providing single-track mountain bike loop trails.

Town and tourism officials in Payson are currently trying to find a way to create at least one 30-mile loop trail for mountain bikers and other nonmotorized users: Evans and others had previously said a Payson Ranger District policy that allowed motorized vehicles on all roads and trails posed a serious barrier to creating a single-track trail system.

Armenta said the district has no policy against creating nonmotorized trails. The Highline Trail already bars off-road vehicles.

"We have no policy that prevents" single-track trails for bikes, hikers and horses that bars off-road vehicles.

He said the district has lost the biologists and recreation planners necessary to study the environmental impacts of something like a

new trail designed for mountain bikers. The lack of manpower to do the studies necessary to make a decision has already substantially delayed the whole travel management plan. In addition, Payson is already complaining about the time it has taken to begin the environmental assessment on a proposed pipeline along Houston Mesa Road to deliver drinking water from the Blue Ridge Reservoir.

"We do have limitations on time, dollars and other priorities. If the town came to me and said 'we want a 20-mile bike trail versus our pipeline from Blue Ridge,' which would be the priority to them and to us? We have limited time and dollars — but we're not opposed to establishing some sort of nonmotorized trail system."

On the other hand, the district is bracing for an outcry from off-roaders, once it releases its travel management map and starts the long process of restricting currently wide-open cross-country travel.

The current system has caused significant erosion and impacts on wildlife, according to several studies. It also has created some striking ironies. For instance, under the current rules, the Forest Service can close down a heavily eroded road. Such roads often dramatically increase the buildup of silt on sensitive streams and impact wildlife. However, since cross-country travel remains legal throughout the forest — a quad rider could just drive through the forest alongside a closed road, and many do that now.

Cross-country travel "has a tremendous impact," said Armenta, "and trails are created every day as we speak. Unfortunately, some people are not as responsible as others — and they just want to push their vehicle to the limit."