

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

azcentral.com

APRIL 2, 2008

Editorial

Here's the problem

Arizona's public lands are taking a beating from off-highway vehicles. Careless or uninformed riders are permanently scarring our wonderful desert, grasslands and forests. While it looks tough, this arid landscape is so fragile that there are still wheel ruts from more than a century ago.

In some places, the web of improvised trails has scoured out a large share of the habitat. Without ground cover, the trails erode quickly, changing the water flow and multiplying the damage. And the destruction

spirals. As spots become rutted and impassable, riders cut around them, widening the damage. Wildlife loses forage. Archaeological sites are wiped out. Riding along streambeds and banks can cause sedimentation that fills the pools where fish live.

More and more Arizonans love to get out in their OHVs, whether for a special activity like hunting or just to enjoy the ride. But if we don't get a handle on irresponsible use, the fun will stop. Public land managers will be forced to close off access entirely.

Here's the solution . . . OHV users pay to play

A bill at the Legislature would create an annual registration system for off-highway vehicles. The cost, likely in the range of \$20, would be set through public rulemaking. The money would go into a new Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Fund to pay for law enforcement, education, trail work and habitat restoration. Arizona Game and Fish sums it up this way: User pay, user play. It's the logical way to ensure that Arizonans continue to enjoy OHV recreation.

This measure has more support from a wider range of interests than virtually any piece of legislation has ever had. How often do hunting organizations, the Nature Conservancy, motor-sport dealers, the National Rifle Association, OHV clubs and the Arizona Association of Counties all agree on a bill?

Yet it stalled in committee this year, after failing to pass by a single vote last year. The bill's sponsor, Rep. Jerry Weiers, R-Glendale, managed to revive it. The OHV proposal was substituted for the language of another measure, Senate Bill 1167, which was originally about funeral escort vehicles.

No one should be misled by funding the state supposedly puts into OHV trails right now: That's grant money, which requires matching dollars, and it's vulnerable to being swept away whenever there's a state budget crunch.

And no one should doubt the motivation behind this bill: to preserve OHV recreation. Weiers knows that maintaining access to public lands hinges on preventing and repairing damage. OHV enthusiasts are beginning to see, he says, "that by doing nothing, they're not going to have anyplace to ride."

In some areas, the crosshatch of improvised trails is so heavy that careful OHV riders can't even tell where they're allowed to go. They need signage and trail improvements.

Or they'll face locked gates. The Legislature should get on track and pass this well-balanced, well-crafted OHV bill.