

Off-road-vehicle bans seem to please no one

Environmentalists say latest national-forest restrictions are too lax; ORV fans say they're too strict.

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*ELDORADO NATIONAL FOREST,
PLACERVILLE, CALIF.*

After a body-and-machine-pounding ride beneath the high-pine canopy of the Eldorado National Forest in east-central California, Kevin Wigham sits with his buddies by their knobby-tired motorcycles, mulling a collective dread: Fewer trails to ride.

Here in the Eldorado, which some regard as "ground zero" for the growing national debate over off-road vehicles on public lands, the template for future action across millions of federal acres could be set, observers say. A new official Eldorado map finalized last week eliminates about 500 miles of "user created" routes (trails and roads) that were never permitted by the Forest Service.

That "motorized vehicle use map" is the culmination of years of debate and legal action. It leaves in place more than 1,000 miles of dirt roads and 210 miles of trails for off-road vehicles (ORVs) in Eldorado. Environmentalists say it's still too much and the budget for enforcing



Dirt bikers: Jeff Brown (r.), a high school teacher, and Richard Vander Meeden, a retired sales executive, finish a ride in an ORV-approved section of Eldorado National Forest. (Mark Clayton)

it too small. Enthusiasts chafe under the new restrictions and some ignore them, though at least one major off-road group concedes it's time for some "management."

"Even with the [trail] closings ... there's still a lot out there," says Mr. Wigham. "But I personally hate to see them closing any type of trail. I don't know why they do it. We're not hurting anything."

Still, some 11.5 million visitors rode ORVs in national forests last year. Some rode designated trails; others churned up forest floors, damaged root systems, and accelerated erosion, environmentalists say. The

vehicles can leave lasting scars on landscape and drive away wildlife and nonmotorized human visitors.

Clashes over off-road vehicles on public lands aren't new. President Nixon in 1972 issued an executive order requiring federal land managers to minimize environmental damage and social conflict by designating trails acceptable for off-road use. But after decades with little change in the restriction of off-road use in national forests, coupled with fast-rising interest in off-road riding, environmentalists filed suit in the Eldorado in 2003.

Congress last month concluded its first hearings on ORV impacts on national forests and millions of acres of public lands overseen by the Bureau of Land Management. While the BLM is taking some action, it is the Forest Service that is charging ahead to regulate ORV use.

Nationwide, 34 of 155 national forests have completed new vehicle-use maps with the rest on schedule to finish by 2009. Still, environmentalists worry the Forest Service mapping and restrictions won't sufficiently protect the 193 million acres of national forest – which are open to commercial logging and mining as well as camping, hiking, and ORV riding.

Between 1999 and 2007, off-road enthusiasts over age 16 rose from 38 million to more than 44 million, surveys show. With many states and counties outlawing ORVs in recreational areas, off-roaders have increasingly looked to federal lands for a good ride.

That pressure led the Forest Service in 2003 to declare that “unmanaged recreation” – referring to off-road vehicles – was among the top four threats to national forests. Two years later, the agency announced a new nationwide “travel management rule,” mandating that each forest develop trail designations and a map showing vehicle restrictions. That same year, environmentalists won a key federal court victory in California forcing an environmental appraisal of Eldorado's motorized trail network.

Yet as of January, some 64 million acres – about one third – of national Forest Service land was still “completely open” to cross-

country motor vehicle use, stated Joel Holtrop, deputy chief of the National Forest System, in remarks prepared for a congressional hearing last month. That may be about to change.

Today, the Forest Service still has 47,000 miles of trail – about one-third of all trails officially available – open to motorized vehicles, Mr. Holtrop said. But that does not include many more “user created” trails, which are on the target list to be eliminated on many new forest maps, observers say.

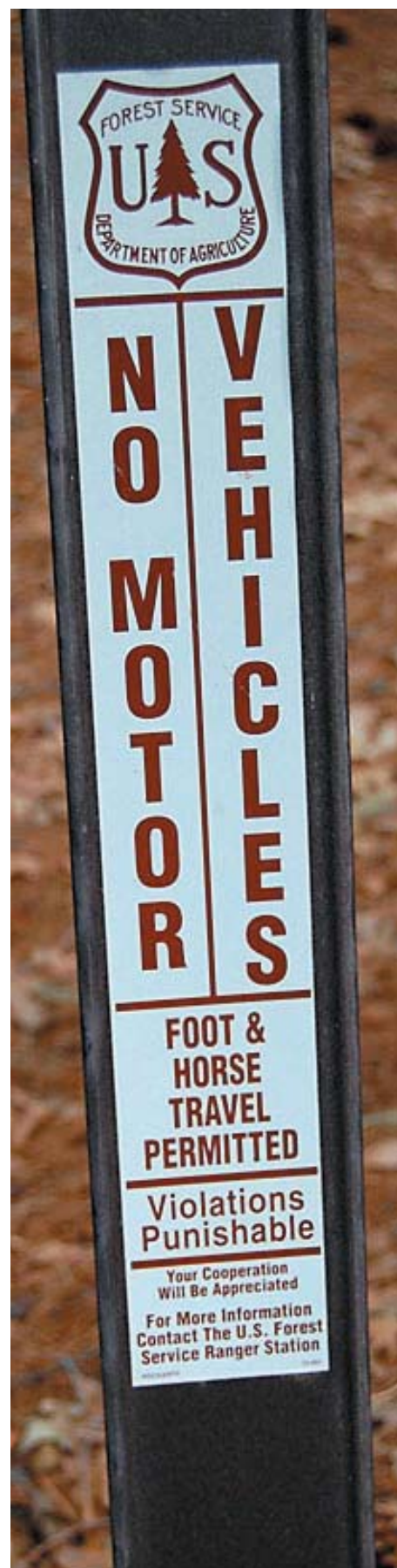
Even ORV enthusiasts say some regulation needed now

Off-road enthusiast Brian Hawthorne, public lands policy director for the BlueRibbon Coalition, a group representing off-road enthusiasts and vehicle retailers, says trail reductions so far have been excessive – especially in Eldorado. But he also acknowledges a need for motorized vehicles to be brought under control in national forests.

“It's the right thing to do,” he says. “The population of off-highway vehicles is at a level where it needs to be managed.”

Environmentalists and former national Forest Service officials agree the US Forest Service deserves credit for taking action, but worry that ongoing damage to forest lands won't be fixed by steps taken so far.

“What we're seeing is the Forest Service more or less putting into place the status quo – this is what we're going to live with,” says Jim Furnish, former US Forest Service deputy chief. “I don't see this



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A US Forest Service sign aims to restrict motorized vehicles from a trail.

move wrestling the problem to the ground.”

Without more “boots on the ground” and stiffer penalties (including impounding vehicles), rampant violation of trail signs will continue under the new regime as under the old, Mr. Furnish says.

Others worry that the maps are being drawn with little serious evaluation. Despite years spent evaluating Eldorado’s motorized trail system, many miles were designated for ORV use without scientifically evaluating their impact on the environment, says Karen Schambach, California coordinator for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a national group that has been critical of ORV impacts on public lands.

“Our concern now is that they still don’t get it,” she says. “Here in Eldorado, they need to do site-specific analysis of each trail they designate to ensure that the environment isn’t damaged. But even where they do have information, like sediment going into a creek, they sometimes ignore that and designate the trail anyway.”

That’s not how Ramiro Villalvazo, forest supervisor at Eldorado, sees it. It was his April decision that led to the new map with fewer user-created trails, a map upheld this month by the regional review team.

“We have followed a very careful, very methodical approach that takes into account the interests and viewpoints of the many stakeholders,” Mr. Villalvazo says in an interview at Eldorado Forest headquarters in Placerville, Calif.

“It’s a balancing act and we’re trying to do what’s right for all involved.” The new map, he says “is in no way the end of this process.”

But Furnish and others say it shows the Forest Service’s national push on ORVs is just a “paper exercise” that protects damaging activities while doing little to fund new off-road restrictions.

“We’re concerned about that, too,” says James Bedwell, director of recreation for the US Forest Service in an interview. “We don’t want to do just a paper exercise, we know there’s a lot of management and education that has to take place. We do believe we are taking the right first steps.”

Budgets already too small to maintain all routes

Standing by an Eldorado trail whose “no vehicles” sign has obviously been driven over recently, Ms. Schambach says the Forest Service has approved more trails for off-road use than it has manpower or budget to manage.

Indeed, federal data for other national forests strongly suggests that the number of miles of off-road vehicle trails being approved will come on top of already strained Forest Service transportation-management budgets – if there is any extra funding at all to oversee the new trails that are designated.

In the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in Arizona, for instance, the budget for maintaining routes can support just one-third of the existing routes, according to that forest’s most recent transportation analysis. In the Lincoln National Forest in New Mexico, annual road maintenance funding is \$5.7

million, though it has deferred maintenance needs of \$30 million and can afford only 9 percent of its road system, another report found.

“We don’t expect a national forest [official] to say: ‘We can only afford this percent, so we’re shutting down,’” says Cyndi Tuell, Southwestconservationadvocatefor the Center for Biological Diversity, a Tucson-based environmental group. “But we don’t expect them to add a bunch more trails, either.”

Off-road enthusiasts see a mixed bag, too. Richard Yeargan is former president of the Motherlode Rockcrawlers, a four-wheel-drive group that has helped Eldorado Forest managers maintain a number of trails.

“We haven’t had any of our adopted trails cut off, but there are a lot of places we just can’t go anymore,” he says. “It really upsets me, the loss of all the little spur roads where we used to go camping.”

That means the 35 families in his Motherlode group must now park and lug their gear to a remote site – or camp near the motorized trail to which their vehicles are now restricted.

“If you want to camp now, you have to do it right next to the trail with motorcycles, jeeps, and stuff driving right by your tent,” Mr. Yeargan says.