



Santa Fe forest rejects closure petition

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—The U.S. Forest Service has rejected a petition filed by a group of environmentalists and landowners to close more than two dozen routes in the Jemez Mountains, saying a hastily prepared analysis or one-sided decision could compromise the agency's progress on a management plan in the northern New Mexico forest.

The group filed the petition in March, saying they were concerned that continued use of the routes by off-highway vehicles would cause more erosion and negatively affect wildlife.

Santa Fe Forest Supervisor Dan Jiron said he considered the evidence presented in the petition, including several photographs showing eroded trails and roads.

"I do not conclude that motorized use is directly causing considerable adverse effects to natural and cultural resources sufficient to warrant an immediate closure," Jiron said in a June 3 letter mailed to petitioners.

Jiron also noted the forest is developing a travel management plan, which will include the Jemez Ranger District. He said making a hasty decision on the group's request for an emergency protection order could invalidate the public comments and planning that have gone into the process so far.

"This would only delay our progress toward more active management of motorized use," Jiron said.

The forest also said the petitioners sought to close the routes using an inappropriate administrative rule.

The petitioners said Monday they are considering how to respond to the denial.

Landowners, environmentalists and OHV enthusiasts have been butting heads over travel management planning in New Mexico and other states as the Forest Service tries to decide which areas should be designated for travel by motorcycles, four-wheelers and other vehicles.

Cyndi Tuell of the Center for Biological Diversity said the petition wasn't based on the agency's current travel management process.

"We are clearly asking the Forest Service to act on the decades-old executive orders that require the Forest Service to immediately close an area being damaged by off-road vehicles until that damage has been eliminated and future damage has been prevented," Tuell said.

Kevin Stillman, a resident who signed the petition, has argued there are areas in the Jemez Mountains that are off-limits to vehicles but people continue to use those routes. He pointed to a gate at Los Utes Road that remained open over the weekend although it should have been closed.

"Everybody agrees there's a problem except for the Forest Service," he said. "That's what we're trying to get them to do, to realize there is in fact a problem and it does need to be addressed. We just want some action."

Off-road enthusiasts have criticized the petition, saying erosion is a natural process and can be found elsewhere in the forest. Some have pointed to Winsor Trail, a popular spot near Santa Fe that is off-limits to motorized users but still has seen its share of erosion.

Joanne Spivack, past president of the New Mexico Off Highway Vehicle Alliance, said the Forest Service's own research shows that erosion happens everywhere but more on bare surfaces and where trails aren't properly designed to allow rain to run off to the side.

"You could ban everyone from the trails and they would still erode until they grew over. But they won't grow over because of travel management decisions," she said. "The travel management decisions will ban only OHVs and leave all the trails open to all non-motorized users. This means all the trails will continue to exist as bare surfaces and they will all continue to generate erosion."

A final decision on travel management in the Santa Fe forest is expected next May, Jiron said.

"We are confident that the decision on designation for motorized use ... will be one which appropriately protects natural resources, while allowing motorized use on a managed basis," he said in the letter to the petitioners.