

Tonto tightens off-road vehicle rules

By Joe Kullman, Tribune
November 7, 2005

Efforts to battle one of the growing environmental threats to Tonto National Forest lands near the East Valley are about to be stepped up.

The U.S. Forest Service has given Tonto officials more authority to restrict off-road motor vehicle use.

Mostly affected are forest areas closest to Scottsdale and Mesa — among the busiest public recreation lands in the country and especially popular for off-roading.

An off-roading boom in recent years has led to increased damage to plant and wildlife habitat and conflicts with hikers, horseback riders and mountain bikers, said Tonto spokesman Vinnie Picard.

"Places where in the 1980s you might have seen about 20 (off-road) riders in a day, you now will see about 100," Picard said.

Until now, off-road motor vehicles could be wherever they were not specifically prohibited on the 2.9 million-acre forest.

The new rules will limit offroad motor vehicles to designated trails.

It likely will take at least four years before all new trail designations are in place, said Tammy Pike, Tonto's offroading and trails coordinator.

Until then, forest managers still can ban or severely restrict motor vehicles in areas where heavy environmental damage is being done or there are safety issues, Pike said.

One particular concern is the Sycamore Creek area about 10 miles north of Mesa.

Some environmentalists said they're disappointed the new rules don't call for automatically closing unauthorized trails that off-roaders have carved in the past few decades.

"We're concerned that illegal routes are going to be made legal" when trail systems for off-road vehicles are devised, said Erik Ryberg of the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity.

Pike said she anticipates many unauthorized trails on the Tonto will be closed, "but if some trails can play a role in a network of trails that makes sense, we may keep them."

Forest officials said they're confident the new regulatory system can work.

"Very few of them are renegades. Most users are families. It's parents and their kids. . . . The adults care about protecting the land for the next generation," Picard said.

Some groups are even planning to join forest officials in seeking grants to fund trail maintenance, trail signs and maps for approved off-road routes, said Jeff Gursh, a leader of the Arizona Trail Riders and the Arizona Off-Highway Vehicle Coalition.

Contact Joe Kullman by email, or phone (480) 970-2342