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Disparate trail lovers on quest for common ground

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They came to Santa Fe's Unitarian Universalist Congregation Church, 115 of them dressed to match their convictions: Off-road enthusiasts wearing Baja 500 and Rattle Snake motocross T-shirts; ranchers in Western shirts and cowboy boots; hikers in Texas.

They gathered Tuesday evening to ask Santa Fe National Forest staff questions about a proposed system of roads and trails for motorized vehicle use. On the walls hung oversized maps for different sections of the forest. Some showed existing roads and trails. The other showed which roads and trails the Forest Service proposes to leave open for motorized vehicles.

Kim Freeman, a volunteer with the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and a hiker, was among many at the meeting who believed unmanaged off-road use was ruining some portions of the forest, in the Jemez Ranger District in particular. "I don't go to the Jemez to hike anymore," she said. "It isn't a place to enjoy quiet recreation. Who wants to hike when all you hear is a whine that sounds like chain saws going?"

Dirt-bike enthusiasts and Santa Fe natives Michael and Andrea Mueller also attended the meeting. They moved back to the area recently after a stint in Salt Lake City, where they said a lot of trails are shared by motorcycles, hikers and mountain bikers on surrounding national forest lands.

"New Mexico doesn't seem to have much in the way of trails by comparison. Then we hear they want to close trails (to motorized use)," said Andrea Mueller. "Seems like there's already a lot of places in the forest just for hikers, like the wilderness, where they can go to get away from conflicts."

Wilderness areas are closed to motorized-vehicle use.

Tuesday was the ninth of 13 public meetings the agency is holding during this 45-day public-comment period on the draft proposed action for the so-called Travel Management Plan. The comment period ends Sept. 2.

All national forests are in the midst of creating these plans, designating where dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles and trucks will be allowed.

Under the proposed action, the Santa Fe National Forest is planning to close more than half the roads in the forest to motorized use, leaving 2,309 miles open. It also proposed designating 247 miles of trail open to motorized use, 142 miles of that for dirt bikers only, primarily in the Jemez area.

The biggest concern people have expressed at earlier meetings is how the Forest Service, chronically

understaffed and underfunded, will enforce a designated motorized system. Private property owners also are worried whether they will still be able to reach their inholdings if the forest service closes the roads to motorized vehicles.

One of the most contentious issues surrounds trails created by dirt bikers in the Jemez area. Some trails are decades old, but some were built after new federal laws came into play that require an environmental review before building, according to Freeman.

Freeman and David Ehrman, also with the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, said those trails were built illegally and are creating erosion problems. Members of the Blackfeather dirt-biking club that created the trails deny the trails are illegal and say they worked with the Forest Service or had permission to make the trails.

Julie Bain, who's coordinating the Travel Management Plan for the Santa Fe National Forest, said it is illegal to "build" a trail by cutting a tree or other vegetation, though it isn't illegal right now to simply drive or bike cross-country in most areas of the forest. But she said the Blackfeather trails, some of which appear on the Forest Service's proposed designated trail map and some of which are not, are a gray area. Some were built with Forest Service permission and some weren't. Some are damaging land and some aren't.

Freeman said it's true hikers and mountain bikers also now use the dirt-bike trails, but they wouldn't have "cut those trails" on their own.

The Muellers said if trails created by dirt bikers in the Jemez are closed to motorized use because they are deemed "illegal," then trails should be closed to all uses, including hiking and mountain biking.

They said New Mexico could look to states like Utah and Colorado to see how conflicts between users are managed. They said good signage, including signs that remind people of the trail to "respect" order work well in Utah. Hikers have the first right of way, then mountain bikers and finally motorized vehicles, Michael Mueller said. "I think problems come down to a lack of respect," he said. "One idiot rider can make a bad reputation for everyone else. We can all get along."

The Forest Service has spent two years so far on the Travel Management Plan and collected more than 5,000 comments.

Freeman said the Forest Service won't be able to please everyone with the Travel Management Plan, but the draft action tries to.

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