



Thursday, July 22, 2010

## **FORESTS: Kaibab managers allow hunters OHV access to retrieve game**

April Reese, E&E reporter

A travel management plan for a popular hunting area within Arizona's Kaibab National Forest would restrict off-highway access to designated roads -- except for hunters who need to travel off-road to retrieve big game.

That provision is drawing fire from environmental groups, which last year appealed a similar policy on a neighboring district within the Kaibab forest, citing concerns about impacts to endangered species.

The travel plan, released last week, allows motorized travel on about 1,114 miles of roads on the Williams Ranger District comprising the southern third of the Arizona forest, just south of Grand Canyon National Park.

The plan restricts motorized access to designated roads and closes about 380 miles of road that are now open. About 16 miles of road were added to the authorized road system, including eight miles that were previously closed and eight miles that have been created by off-highway vehicle (OHV) users.

The plan also allows OHVs to travel off-road within 1 mile of a designated route for hunters to retrieve downed game during elk hunting season. Hunters will be required to use "the most direct and least ground disturbing route in and out of the area," according to the plan.

Kaibab National Forest managers will allow hunters to use off-highway vehicles to drive as much as 1 mile off designated travel routes to retrieve downed elk. Photo courtesy of Arizona Game and Fish Department.



Kaibab National Forest managers will allow hunters to use off-highway vehicles to drive as much as 1 mile off designated travel routes to retrieve downed elk. (Photo courtesy of Arizona Game and Fish Department)

The Forest Service's national travel management rule, issued in 2005, allows for limited cross-country travel "solely for the purposes of big game retrieval or dispersed camping." But forest managers are to use that option "sparingly," according to the document.

Environmental groups maintain the Williams District plan violates the travel management rule because it would allow OHVs into areas that provide habitat for Mexican spotted owls, a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

"Game retrieval will continue to cause mice and other [Mexican owl] food sources to be crushed by OHVs," said Cyndi Tuell of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

Furthermore, trailblazing by OHVs could create de facto new routes that other users could mistake for designated routes, critics say.

While it remains unclear whether environmentalists will formally challenge the plan, forest managers elsewhere have rescinded similar exemptions for hunters on OHVs.

Grand Mesa National Forest in western Colorado, for example, abandoned an OHV game retrieval policy in 2005, concluding that “the privilege accorded by this authorization ... has been systematically abused.” Forest managers concluded that hunters in Grand Mesa were traveling into areas outside the established game retrieval zones and creating illegal routes.

Last year, environmental groups appealed a similar travel plan for the Kaibab forest’s Tusayan Ranger District, just north of the Williams District, citing similar concerns about potential damage from OHVs going off-road to retrieve game (Greenwire, Aug. 4, 2009). Forest managers are now preparing a new plan for the Tusayan district. The revised document will be issued within the next few months, said Jacqueline Banks, a spokeswoman for the Kaibab National Forest, but it remains unclear what, if any, changes will be made to the OHV provisions.

Banks said the agency decided to allow OHV users to retrieve game in the Williams District because of the difficulty of carrying dead elk out of the forest on foot. In 2008, hunters retrieved an estimated 700 shot elk from the Williams District. “Elk are large, heavy animals, and the majority of elk hunters currently retrieve their harvested animal using a motor vehicle,” she said, noting that most bull elk weigh 600 to 800 pounds while cows range from 450 to 600 pounds.

Furthermore, Arizona Game and Fish Department regulations require hunters to fully remove downed game to prevent waste, and prohibiting motorized access from all non-designated areas would tempt hunters to violate those rules, she said.

Moreover, Banks said, hunters are needed to help cull the forest’s elk populations. Left unchecked, the ungulates

can overgraze vegetation and eventually alter native plant communities, she said.

#### OTHER ISSUES

While commending the Forest Service for closing 380 miles of Williams District roads to OHVs, environmentalists say the plan retains roughly 200 miles of designated roads that should be closed to travel.

Tuell, of CBD, said she is also worried the agency will not revegetate closed roads, leaving them vulnerable to erosion.

Banks said the Forest Service will revegetate some closed roads, but only after analyzing each road segment to determine where restoration is required. Revegetation will happen “one road at a time,” she added, as funding allows.

Kaibab officials will post signs to notify OHV users of the new closures and will distribute maps showing the new designated route system, Banks said. But closed roads will not be gated, leaving it up to riders whether to stay out of areas not designated on the new maps.

“This is going to require a change in thinking on behalf of the public,” she said. “People are going to have to learn that if they’re going to be doing motorized activities, they need to check in at the office to see what’s open,” just as campers or anglers already do.

Banks emphasized that restricting OHV travel to designated routes will help protect the forest’s resources, including key wildlife habitat and cultural sites, far more effectively than the old management strategy.

“There’s damage to all kinds of resources when you have people with large vehicles traveling anywhere they want on the forest,” she said. “So this is a huge leap forward to limiting damage to natural resources.”

*Reese writes from Santa Fe, N.M.*