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Kaibab 1st with road closures

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The forest surrounding Williams likely will be the first in the area to be closed to cross-country travel by off-road vehicles this fall, pending any appeals.

That's also when those wanting to car camp or drive forest roads will need a map, distributed by the agency for free, to know whether the road they're about to use is legally closed or open.

The district ranger is closing 380 miles of open roads, adding 16 miles of roads (including some user-created roads), and leaving open about 70 small spur roads used by car campers.

Elk hunters will be able to use a vehicle to retrieve an elk in most of the Williams Ranger District, provided they use a direct route and cross streams in specific places.

Today, drivers can legally head out across open forest areas in most places, provided they aren't in wilderness, aren't damaging a meadow and are not in a special closure area.

That policy is ending nationally and in northern Arizona.

The U.S. Forest Service has

determined that off-road driving has harmed some federal forest lands, so it has asked each forest to review what will be open or closed to cross-country driving.

ELIMINATE PARALLEL ROADS

Employees of the Coconino and Kaibab national forests have been drafting plans and taking comments on what to leave open or close for the past few years.

The plans on the Williams Ranger District leave major arteries and a number of smaller roads in place, but eliminate parallel roads and small road segments that lead to the same destination as other roads.

Overall, the plans face appeals from groups who say the forest managers want to close too much area to motorized travel, and from conservation groups who say the Forest Service isn't going far enough.

And staff working on the plans say they're more difficult to write than imagined; to decide where people can drive, for example, you also have to set rules about where they can car camp.

Another lingering question is how the new rules will be enforced, given the handful of Forest Service

law enforcement officials charged with patrolling millions of acres.

The agencies have said they are relying, somewhat, on the public complying with the new rules and just accepting them.

FROM FLAGSTAFF TO WESTERN OREGON

The Center for Biological Diversity, a conservation group, has appealed a similar plan in Tusayan, and it listed what it saw as pros and cons for the Williams plan.

The roads to be closed on the Williams district aren't slated to be revegetated, the group complained, and those left open will still total the equivalent of a road stretching from Flagstaff to western Oregon in mileage.

The group wanted the agency to limit use of vehicles for elk retrieval during part of the season, and close more roads to vehicles.

"We've known for decades that ORVs wreak havoc on fragile desert ecosystems and wildlife," said Cyndi Tuell, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Unfortunately, this decision is not going to adequately protect wildlife like pronghorns and Mexican spotted owls."