

Opinion: Apply Gulf-spill lessons to forest's travel-management plan

By Dee Blanco and Tom Brady
Santa Fe Residents

Like our neighbors on the Gulf Coast, we too have a unique natural wonder right in our front yard: the Santa Fe National Forest. The Forest Service is considering five alternative plans to limit off-road-vehicle use in the public forest. Regulation is clearly needed. Currently, there are zero constraints, and the forest is the worse for it.

The Forest Service is set to make this decision in the shadow cast by the largest man-made environmental catastrophe in history. So what are we learning from the Gulf tragedy that might be incorporated in the anticipated travel-management plan?

Lesson #1: Our forest, like the Gulf, is absolutely irreplaceable. It embodies eons of evolution. Generous summer rains have produced the most amazing display of wildflowers we've ever seen, and the first southward migrating hawks are just now arriving. The decision carries a profound responsibility that will have far-reaching consequences — to the seventh generation, as they say.

Lesson #2: Regulation of any kind is only as good as its enforcement. Offshore drilling has rules; but nobody's been upholding them. So when, at a recent public meeting, we were told that the main "enforcement tool" of the Travel Management Plan for our forest would be a map of legal roads and trails, we were dumbstruck! We've all just seen this "we-can-regulate-ourselves" approach poison the Gulf.

Shouldn't the Gulf offer enough proof that letting the fox guard the hen house is a really bad idea? Off-road vehicle sales are declining. Wouldn't it be prudent to start by legalizing fewer, rather than more, trails? Besides, since off-roaders are responsible for much of the growing damage to both public and private property, shouldn't they have to prove themselves capable of following the rules? They give lip service to respect for the forest, but then they turn around and regularly violate it.

Lesson #3: We cannot trust the federal government to do the right thing. It has been documented by the University of South Florida that dispersed oil micro-droplets are present

throughout the Gulf water column in a way that is likely to negatively impact the entire ecosystem. BP is responsible and the Coast Guard and federal regulatory agencies are complicit in the cover-up.

The Forest Service offered us five alternative plans. One leaves the entire forest open. To be fair, it could have proposed the opposite, or something close to it; the White Mountain Wilderness, for example, allows almost no off-road access. But it didn't. The most restrictive alternative starts with one-third of the forest open. It sure looks to us like the whole process has been rigged right from the start to favor the less than 5 percent of forest users who ride these machines!

We didn't feel seen or heard when this process began, so we disrupted the meetings. Then promises made by Forest Service officials, who've since been transferred, are suddenly null and void. So why should we trust the Forest Service with our forest any more than the people on the Gulf should trust the EPA?

We want our forests protected. With climate chaos already upon us, we're going to need every carbon-sequestering friend we've got. We pray that the Forest Service sets us on an enlightened path. May the forest, and all its creatures, be with them.

Dee Blanco and Tom Brady are Santa Fe residents participating in the Travel Management Plan process as advocates for the rights of the forest itself.

