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Coconino Voices: Forest road closure plans still don't go far enough

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Guest Columnist

When you imagine spending time in northern Arizona's national forests, what do you picture? Towering ponderosa pines, snow-covered hills and valleys, rugged mountain trails descending into scenic valleys with crystal clear lakes and babbling streams? Or roads deteriorating from years of neglect, ORVs churning Mormon Lake into a mud pit, and illegal roads cutting across meadows and streambanks?

Recently, the Arizona Game and Fish Department closed the Upper Verde River Wildlife Area to all motorized uses after years of illegal ORV use put wildlife at risk. In the past year, fewer than 25 percent of ORV owners are registering their vehicles as required by Arizona law. A 2001 survey of ORV users found that 15-20 percent admitted to frequently breaking the rules and riding off of legal routes. There are endless miles of unauthorized roads and motorized trails that fragment wildlife habitat, cause erosion, and spread exotic weeds.

ORV recreation is recognized as one of four key threats (along with fire, invasive species, and

loss of open space) to our public forests. The Coconino and Kaibab National Forests began travel-management planning to designate open roads and prevent cross-country motorized vehicle use. The draft plans would leave more miles of road than the Forest Service can afford to maintain, and allow hunters to drive across the vast majority of the forest -- off of roads.

The Coconino can afford just 10 percent of the roads it has. The Kaibab can afford just 8 percent. Yet both forests are irresponsibly planning to keep thousands of miles of unneeded roads on the ground and open to the public. These unmaintained roads, like the east end of the Friedland Prairie road above Schultz Pass, will erode over time. Forest visitors will eventually need a four-wheel drive vehicle just to get to favored hiking trails or campsites for a quiet hike or picnic. Both forests must develop alternative plans the represent fiscally responsible road systems, something between what the Forest Service can afford and what they are currently proposing. A good start would be to close and rehabilitate all roads identified as high risk and low value.

In the West, only Arizona and a few forests in New Mexico are planning to allow hunters to drive off-road to retrieve downed big-game. The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish has said it doesn't want special treatment for hunters and wants the rules applied to hikers and campers to apply exactly the same way to hunters. Driving off-road to pick up an elk or deer is unnecessary and will continue to spread invasive weeds and fragment wildlife habitat. ORVs crashing through the woods spook game and ruin the hunt for others.

The Forest Service should be encouraging "quiet recreation" dollars to stay in northern Arizona by developing a responsible road system and providing adequate non-motorized activities, not driving away the majority of forest visitors with excessive motorized recreational experiences for a small minority of forest users.

Contact the Forest Service and ask for fiscally and environmentally responsible plans.

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