



FORESTS: Gila travel plan proposal stokes fury among off-roaders

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E&E reporter

In what may be the largest opposition campaign yet for a Forest Service travel management plan, hundreds of southwest New Mexico residents, as well as their congressional representative, are pressing the Gila National Forest to abandon its recently unveiled proposal to close 24 percent of its roads and trails.

At a March 5 rally organized by the opposition group Keep Our Forest Open, which attracted more than 700 people on a Saturday afternoon, Rep. Steve Pearce (R-N.M.) railed against the plan, which he said is another example of the federal government overreaching its authority.

"I'm here today for all of those who have spoken out before but haven't been listened to. I'm here for all the elderly, the disabled, the families ... all those who would lose access to their favorite places to spend time with loved ones," Pearce told attendees at the Silver City, N.M., event, which included off-roading enthusiasts, hunters, tea party activists and others.

"The Forest Service does not under our Constitution have the right to shove these rules down, and



Vehicle tracks along the San Francisco River in the Gila National Forest. Under the Forest Service's new travel management proposal, the river could be closed to motorized access. Photo courtesy of Grant Gourley/Center for Biological Diversity.

we're going to make an issue of it," Pearce added before leading the crowd in a chant of "Keep our forest open, yeah!"

Vehicle tracks along the San Francisco River in the Gila National Forest. Under the Forest Service's new travel management proposal, the river could be closed to motorized access. Photo courtesy of Grant Gourley/Center for Biological Diversity.

The Silver City rally followed a smaller gathering in the town of

Truth or Consequences two days before, during which Pearce said the plan is "an attempt to take away another of our freedoms as Americans."

The Gila draft plan, which includes six alternatives, is the latest in a multi-year, nationwide effort by the Forest Service to rein in off-highway vehicle (OHV) use, which has increased significantly on many national forests. Under the agency's travel management rule, issued by the Bush administration in 2005, all

national forests are required to restrict OHV use to designated trails and roads. Currently, motorized recreation is allowed everywhere on the Gila National Forest except in designated wilderness or other protected areas.

The Forest Service's favored plan for the Gila, outlined in a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) released in January, would prohibit cross-country travel, reduce roads in the 3.3-million-acre forest from 4,604 to 3,343 miles, and increase trails from 16 to 182 miles.

Officials say the alternative is a fair compromise that would balance natural resource protection and motorized access. But the plan's increasingly vocal critics, thousands of whom submitted comments on the draft EIS, say the forest's current travel policies should not be changed.

"We really feel like this is an excessive plan, and we're very much opposed to it," said Mike Skidmore, who chairs the board of Keep Our Forest Open. The group formed in mid-January for the sole purpose of fighting the proposal. It wants the service to leave the entire forest open to cross-country travel.

Skidmore, whose home in Truth or Consequences is about an hour's drive from the forest, said that in his experience OHV users do not cause significant damage to forest resources, and he questioned the need for the proposed restrictions.

"I've been going to the forest for 27 years, and I've never seen anyone abusing the forest," he said. "I'd like to see those specific sites. I really

feel it's a disservice to the public to punish everyone for the actions of a few."

New restrictions

Of particular concern to Skidmore are proposed prohibitions on driving motorized vehicles to the edge of streams, and new restrictions on dispersed camping. About 809 miles of streambank would no longer be available to motorized camping, and the Forest Service's chosen alternative calls for 158 fewer stream crossings to help protect aquatic habitat for species like the spike dace and loach minnow, which are both on the Endangered Species List.

"We feel like we're the stewards of the land, we love it, we love seeing the wildlife," Skidmore said. "We're not out there to damage the forest -- we want to take care of it. It seems like the Forest Service is saying it's the king's forest, and we're going to shut you out. We feel like we've been walked on, run over and ignored."

Two county commissions, representing Grant and Catron counties, have thrown their support behind the draft EIS's "no action" alternative, which would keep the current travel policy in place.

Environmental groups, meanwhile, are urging the agency to abandon its proposed action in favor of another alternative that would be even more protective of the forest's natural resources.

"I don't think the Forest Service went far enough," said Cyndi

Tuell of the Center for Biological Diversity. "There are plenty of roads that are of high risk to resources that they left on the ground."

If the agency closed additional roads, it would free up money to repair roads that are left open, she added, noting that the Forest Service has estimated it can only afford to maintain about 22 percent of the Gila's roads. A greater focus on fewer roads would benefit all forms of motorized recreation, she said.

"It's actually a way to make sure everyone has access to the forest," Tuell said, adding that without maintenance, roads and trails that see regular traffic eventually become unusable.

As for Pearce's criticisms, Tuell said the congressman does not appear to understand how the plan would benefit his constituents. The new restrictions would help protect the watershed that provides drinking water for residents of Silver City and other communities fringing the forest, she said.

"The Forest Service recognizes we have far too many roads on the ground and that they are destroying our watershed," she said. "It would be really great if we could get our congressman to understand that."

Dueling plans

Supporters of an alternative that calls for slightly more closures than the Forest Service's favored proposal held their own rally March 4, drawing about 80 people.

The Center for Biological Diversity is urging the agency to adopt the most restrictive alternative in the draft EIS, which would allow 2,300 miles of roads and trails to remain open.

Groups like Keep our Forest Open, however, are exerting equal -- if not greater -- pressure on the Forest Service to choose the "no action" alternative.

By law, all EISs must include the option of continuing the status quo, but in this case it is not really an option because doing nothing would leave the Gila out of compliance with the agency's overarching travel management rule.

Forest Service officials were responding to a wildfire and unavailable to comment. But in the draft EIS, the agency notes that the no-action alternative "would not meet the requirements of the travel management rule to prohibit motor vehicle use off the designated system."

Nevertheless, Skidmore said his group plans to sue the agency if it does not choose the "no action" option when it issues the final plan.

The Gila National Forest -- the sixth-largest national forest in the continental United States -- is one of the most "remote and least developed" federal forests, according to the Forest Service. It is home to the first designated wilderness area, established in 1924 -- 40 years before Congress passed the Wilderness Act -- and it helped shape pioneering conservationist Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," during his tenure

as a Forest Service ranger there in the early 20th century (Land Letter <<http://www.eenews.net/Landletter/2011/02/17/archive/12>> , Feb. 17).

In recent decades, the Gila National Forest has been a lightning rod for many of the Forest Service's thorniest issues, including gray wolf reintroduction, grazing and OHV use (Land Letter <<http://www.eenews.net/Landletter/2010/03/18/archive/1>> , March 18, 2010).

The Forest Service's comment period for the draft EIS ended this week. Agency officials will now review those comments and decide whether to make any changes to the proposal before issuing a final plan in a few months.