

ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

January 18, 2011

Appeals Planned for Pending Road Closure in Carson Forest

BY ANDY STINY
JOURNAL SOUTHERN BUREAU

TAOS — Conservationists and off-road vehicle groups are among those set to challenge a recent decision by Carson National Forest officials to close 363 miles of road on the west side of the forest to motorized travel.

Last month's decision — technically a finding of "no significant impact" on a previously proposed Travel Management Plan gave opponents 45 days to appeal. The plan provides roadside corridors for dispersed camping and big-game removal.

The decision won't affect travel by snowmobile, horseback, bicycle, ski or foot, but bans cross-country motorized travel.

The local decision is part of a U.S. Forest Service plan to designate specific motorized

routes on all forests this year to protect resources and provide for recreation.

The agency will not comment on appeals or citizen concerns until after the appeal period is over, Carson Forest information officer Kathy DeLucas said.

Mark Werkmeister, a board member with the New Mexico Off-Road Vehicle Alliance, said he is working on an appeal. He said his group feels too many roads have been closed to motorized use, although it has no objections to the crosscountry travel ban.

The Taos-based river protection group Amigos Bravos is considering an appeal too, said projects director Rachel Conn. That group and others are concerned that the decision will keep too many roads open to vehicular traffic and that could harm the environment.

In addition, Conn said, the group objects to the decision because existing roads are not adequately identified and there will be little enforcement.

"There are still too many roads, in some cases that cross rivers, and that contributes sediment to rivers which is very harmful to the aquatic habitat," said Conn.

Amigos Bravos, in concert with a coalition of environmental groups, has submitted over 50 pages of comment on the plan to the Forest Service.

Appeals of the travel plan decision can be filed until the end of January by those who have previously submitted comments.

Both Amigos and the Vehicle Alliance say that the Forest Service didn't do a comprehensive survey of the roads in the three ranger districts affected by the Carson decision.

“These routes did not have any environmental analysis legally required,” said Conn.

“We felt they did not have the appropriate range of alternatives,” said Werkmeister.

“They (USFS) are squeezing the existing use into smaller and smaller areas with less opportunities for people to access the forest,” Werkmeister added.

Werkmeister described the alternatives as basically a choice between “eliminating a bunch of roads or eliminating more roads.” His group would like to see the existing road network maintained.

Garrett Veneklasen, chairman of the group Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, feels Carson officials did “a pretty good job” with the plan. But he said he still has concerns, particularly because motorized access can affect the quality of hunting.

“I would like to see more roads closed, and I am an ATV guy,” said Veneklasen. He would also like to see roadless, 5,000- acre

wildlife refuge tracts “where animals

can be and not be threatened and it works.” Veneklasen who said he hunts “everything” says big game equate engine noise with being hunted.

No information was initially made available to the public on the type of analysis the Forest Service did for the plan, said Cyndi Tuell, a Southwest conservation advocate for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

The Forest Service released a second analysis after concerns were raised by the public, Tuell said. An appeal of the “no significant impact” decision from the center also is likely, she added. “They just have way too many roads. They have no plan to get rid of any roads,” said Tuell. “All of the harm caused by the roads is going to continue.”

Sediment run-off into water sources is a prime concern, she added.

Veneklasen and Amigos Bravos are particularly concerned about Forest Road 80 northwest of Tres

Piedras near the Rio las Tusas. Veneklasen described that watershed as “pristine” and home to the cutthroat trout.

The Carson has no plan to keep people off the roads where travel will be prohibited, he said.

“It’s just going to be a bit of a nightmare people are just going to keep driving them