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Group: Plan To Expand Road Access Costly

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A plan by the U.S. Forest Service to expand motor vehicle access to the Mount Taylor Ranger District — including all-terrain vehicles and motorcycles — has collided with an environmental group that claims the plan is too destructive and too expensive.

Since 2008, the Forest Service has been developing a “travel management plan” for the Mount Taylor Ranger District of the Cibola National Forest. The district comprises about 516,000 acres and includes its 11,301-foot-tall namesake peak, the San Mateo Mountains northeast of Grants and the Zuni Mountains to the west.

The Forest Service in August released its 145-page environmental assessment,

with possible impacts of five alternatives for expanding motor vehicle travel in the district.

In April, the Forest Service selected one of those plans, and anyone who commented during the development of the initial assessment has until June 2 to appeal it. The assessment says the plan will have “no significant impact” on the environment.

The plan is being blasted by the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

“We’ll fight this fiscally irresponsible, environmentally damaging plan, which threatens to cut off access to most forest users for the benefit of the few,” said Cyndi Tuell, a Southwest advocate for the organization.

Tuell said the plan fragments ecosystems, interrupts migratory patterns, allow severe erosion and eliminates

wildlife habitats in areas open to motorized travel. She also said the roads will have negative impacts on several species, including the Mexican spotted owl, northern goshawk, American bald eagle and the “extremely rare” spotted bat.

Overall, the plan will result in a total of 674 miles of roads and trails open for public travel — 313 fewer miles than currently exist in the district, said District Ranger Matt Reidy.

Though the plan does not call for building any new roads, designations on how some roads will be used will change. For example, 120 miles of unclassified existing roads will be designated as Forest Service roads and opened for public use. Another 208 miles will be designated as trails for all-terrain vehicles, utility terrain vehicles and motorcycles.

The plan also creates a 344-acre off-highway vehicle area and opens 92 miles of “dispersed camping corridors” in which camping is allowed within 300 feet of the designated roads.

Citing the Forest Service’s environmental assessment, Tuell said it will cost the agency \$441,000 to bring the motorized trails system up to standard and \$67,000 in annual maintenance costs. Those and other related expenses will force the Forest Service to dip into its funds for general road maintenance and recreational programs.

Reidy said forest officials plan to apply for grants and partner with outside groups to offset the costs — a strategy he said has worked well in the past.

The Cibola’s Sandia Ranger District, for example, obtained a \$25,000 grant to help put into effect its travel management plan in 2005. It also worked with the New Mexico Off Highway Vehicle Alliance, which got a separate \$350,000 grant to improve trail signage, build information stations,

reroute trails and reconstruct trailheads.

Reidy said his district has already gotten a \$10,000 grant from the New Mexico Off-Highway Program, and that the off-highway vehicle alliance, Jeeps West, local businesses and bike shops have offered to help develop and maintain the multi-use trails.

The plan “demonstrates that the Forest Supervisor (Nancy Rose) listened to and evaluated everyone’s comments before coming to a decision,” he said. “The decision provides reasonable access to the national forest for the public while considering resource concerns.”

The plan will eventually lead to publication of a Motor Vehicle Use Plan for the area and, once published, operation of motorized vehicles outside designated areas will be prohibited. Roads that need to be rerouted or that lie in areas requiring mitigation of natural and cultural resources will not be included until the work is completed.