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More forest trails set for motorcyclists?

By CYNDY COLE

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Firefighter and motorcyclist Patrick Burns was disappointed in May when the Coconino National Forest officially closed most of its 1.8 million acres to off-road motorcyclists, all-terrain vehicle riders and most other drivers.

Motorcyclists received 18 to 20 miles of single-track trails in Fort Valley while quad riders got the barren 14,000-acre Cinder Hills north of Doney Park.

"We just felt very shunned, I guess, and forgotten about," he said, after groups had lobbied the forest heavily to keep trails open.

It was part of a national U.S. Forest Service proposal to limit erosion and other impacts from off-road driving, and it also meant planners had to come up with new provisions for people who hunt, camp and gather firewood using vehicles.

RESPONSE TO COMPLAINTS

Partly in response to comments from folks like Burns, the Coconino National Forest is now considering building or reopening some 73 miles of trails for motorcycles and ATVs stretching south from Flagstaff's airport to Munds Park between I-17 and Lake Mary Road.

"I think it's a great thing. With the new rule, they took away hundreds and hundreds of single-track trails for motorcyclists, and this is a way to hopefully get some motorized trails back," Burns said.

Riding on a narrow, winding trail in the woods is a lot different than driving down a gravel road -- the option now most available to motorists of all stripes.

"It's more challenging: It's kind of like mountain biking on a single-track mountain bike trail," Burns said.

Others have different views on the matter.

CONTINUOUS NOISE AND DUST

One conservation group that has been tracking the changes said it supports using existing routes near the airport, but it doesn't want new trails built near Munds Park.

"Most forest visitors (both local and non-local) value quieter, more natural experiences. There are many user-created trails in the ... project area, and it is unclear how creating new trails will prevent the ongoing proliferation of illegal routes," wrote Cyndi Tuell of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Campers will be subjected to continuous noise and dust that results from the increased motorized uses in the area."

The Coconino National Forest plans to make a decision on the trail perhaps this winter, and begin building next summer if approved.

No cost estimates are out yet, and funding is a question.

Mike Dechter is the person on the Coconino National Forest receiving phone calls, letters, emails and visits from people with various views on the new restrictions, and he's the one proposing the new motorcycle and ATV trails.

"We did a full noise analysis," he said. "We also ensured that trails were built to get people away from the community rather than ride along the community."

Dechter carries a file of letters about 1 inch thick, talking to each district of the forest about what could be changed or clarified, and returning phone calls.

He's catalogued 500 different ideas, complaints, suggestions or questions the public has raised on the travel restrictions overall to date -- from suggestions on the type size on the maps, to certain roads that should be closed, opened or identified more clearly with signs.

"Please open the roads back up soon!" one letter reads.

HALF KNOW OF RULES

Dechter has spent a majority of this summer explaining the nuances of where a hunter could use a vehicle to retrieve an elk (mostly west of Lake Mary Road), and where one must walk.

About half of the people he meets in the forest now know there are some new restrictions on where they can ride.

"Overall, we're having pretty good compliance," he said.

This comes after public service announcements, handouts, and public meetings with the Forest Service and volunteers meeting cars coming in at heavily used forest roads on holiday weekends.

One letter to Dechter suggests the Forest Service close more camping areas along a certain road to protect a meadow.

Reads another: "I love how you take our money to maintain our lands but don't let us use them. Great plan, NOT!!"

And there are often questions about how far off the road a car camper is allowed to travel (300 feet on specified major roads, otherwise 30 feet).

The Coconino National Forest will print new maps to fix errors every few years, but the plan must undergo a much greater and longer environmental analysis to open or close a number of routes across the whole forest.