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## Forest To Close Roads

By Vince Kong / Journal North Reporter

Nearly 70 percent of roads and trails currently open to vehicles in the Santa Fe National Forest will be closed to motorized travel under a plan released Thursday by forest managers.

All off-road travel also will be forbidden under the plan, which is the result of nearly six years of analysis and public input, officials said.

“Right now, you can pretty well drive anywhere you want, so this is a big difference that people will need to understand,” said Maria Garcia, Santa Fe National Forest supervisor. “... If you want to boil it down, we have changed the way people travel in the national forest. We are all impacted.”

### Santa Fe National Forest Vehicle Plan

Miles of roads and trails available to motorized vehicles under the new plan: 2,463

Miles of authorized and unauthorized roads and trails previously: 7,832

Miles of previously unauthorized routes added: 138

A motor-vehicle use map will be available September online or at the Santa Fe National Forest main office and its district offices. For more information, including the environmental impact statement and maps, visit [www.fs.usda.gov/detail/santafe](http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/santafe).

The new travel plan designates a system of approximately 2,463 miles of motorized travel roads and trails, which is comparable to the driving distance between Las Vegas, Nev., and Washington, D.C., Garcia said. The final decision

was selected from a list five alternatives that were developed from 59 public meetings, dating back to 2005.

### Major rule changes include:

- ☐ Seasonal closures for the protection of wildlife and their habitat.
- ☐ Weather-related closures via a closure order at any time.
- ☐ Increase of managed motorized system trails from 27 miles to 208 miles.
- ☐ About 138 miles of previously unauthorized routes have been added – 82 of which will be for motorcycle use only.
- ☐ Fixed-distance corridors have been established for motorized-dispersed camping, as well as motorized big-game retrieval at 150 feet from either side of the road.
- ☐ Driving within 100 feet of water in all fixed-distance corridors and areas is prohibited.

“We did work very closely with New Mexico Game and Fish throughout this process, and they support our decision,” Garcia said. “Fewer off-road vehicles actually improve hunting opportunities – less noise, more animals.”

But while the area opened to motorized vehicles has been slashed, opponents of the decision contend it didn’t go far enough.

Cyndi Tuell of the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity had only begun to review the forest service’s decision Thursday afternoon, and her initial reaction was: “There’s still over

2,400 miles of roads and trails opened to the public, and according to their own data in their travel analysis report, they cannot afford that high a number of roads and trails. They can afford maybe 10 percent of that,” she said. “... They already also have a \$27 million backlog for maintenance.”

As a result, Tuell contends that 90 percent of the 2,463 miles of trails and roads may end up in disrepair, which could have a significant environmental impact.

“When roads are not maintained properly – they can’t get the gravel on the roads – the dust from the roads kick up and wind up in the streams and in the air,” she said. “As a result, we’re going to lose topsoil permanently, and the erosion in the air causes premature snow melts.”

Still, Tuell said she anticipates that motorized vehicle groups will challenge the decision.

“They are going to say it’s not enough – somebody is going to have to do the math – but I think driving around on 2,400 miles of forest service road will give you days of enjoyment, even at a pretty high speed,” she said. “... Besides, they’re only about five percent of people that use the forests. Most people go into the woods to relax and enjoy the quiet – not have dirt kicked up in their faces. And wildlife does better without noise from motor vehicles on a daily basis.”

An email that was also sent to various members of the New Mexico Off Highway Vehicle Alliance from the Journal seeking comment was not immediately returned.

When Garcia was asked if she expects challenges from her decision, she replied: “I feel I made the best decision. I feel I made a decision that is a compromise because there were people at both ends of the spectrum ... there will be people, of course, who question the decision.”

An appeal of the final travel management decision must be made within 45 days after the legal notice of decision is published in the Journal. Publishing date is set for July 7, officials said.