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## Both Sides Upset With Forest Travel Plan

By Vince Kong / Journal North Reporter

Hearings began this week on appeals challenging the U.S. Forest Service's new travel management plan, which prescribes where visitors can and cannot go on motorized vehicles when visiting the Santa Fe National Forest.

Forest Service officials have scheduled 19 proceedings on the appeals, which will conclude Friday.

Various groups on opposing sides have objected to the plan, released June 28, that would close 70 percent of roads and trails currently open to vehicles, while prohibiting all off-road travel.

While off-road groups, such as the New Mexico Off-Highway Vehicle Alliance, contend in their appeals that the new plan is too restrictive, environmental groups claim just the opposite: the plan opens up too many roads and trails.

"The biggest thing that prompted our appeal is the Forest Service's failure to protect resources," said Cindy Tuell of the Center for Biological Diversity.

In its appeal – which is co-sponsored by WildEarth Guardians, Archeology Southwest and the Sierra Club – the center contends that the Forest Service plan, as it currently stands, would severely impact native species such as the Jemez Mountain salamander.

"It looks like they sacrificed the Jemez. It's been burned, it's been flooded and now it's a throw-away area to the ATVer's," Tuell said. "... But unfortunately it's a very sensitive area. The Jemez Mountain salamander is on the brink of extinction and we don't really need to push it further for recreational reasons."

And limiting road density until adequate studies are conducted is necessary to further understand the impact roads have on wildlife, Tuell added.

"When more analysis happens, the forest wins," she said. "My concern is that when your biologists haven't looked at your proposed changes, how can you make those changes?"

Tuell acknowledged that it was surprising that Jemez Springs Mayor Edmond Temple and Gilbert Sandoval, chairman of the Jemez River Basin Coalition of Acequias, both co-signed the off-roaders appeal.

Last month, describing their appeals, a spokesman for ATV alliance said the Forest Service hasn't proven current motorized use is causing unacceptable impacts, and Temple said the proposed plan would hurt communities like Jemez Springs which depend on visitors who use the forest. Gilbert Sandoval of the acequia coalition said the plan doesn't take into account the needs of rural communities and would crimp traditional culture and uses like grazing and accessing lumber sources.

Tuell said Wednesday: "I think there may be some confusion – a lot of people think that forest access is being cut off through this decision, and the fact is that it's still really difficult to get more than a mile away from a road with this decision," she said.

Bryan Bird of WildEarth Guardians agreed.

"With this plan, there are very few places outside of wilderness that you can find peace and quiet," he said. "It's still is a step forward, for sure – until now, the forest has been completely open. ... But the problem is that they haven't limited motorized vehicles enough and the wildlife and water will suffer for it in the long run."

And Tuell added that policies should reflect the majority of forest users.

“The people clamoring for more roads usually make up one to four percent of forest users,” she said, “and the forest service can only afford to maintain only 10 percent of the roads they have.

“So when we designate more roads for ATVer’s, it costs money and takes away money from maintaining those roads that 95 percent of us use.”