



Forest roads face closure

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Rules banning cross-country driving and closing more than half of rural forest roads are coming for the Coconino National Forest, and they will likely affect hunters, motorcycle riders and car campers.

Groups on either side of the issue are unhappy with some of the plans, set to be enacted in February, and at least one organization proposes an appeal that could delay implementation.

The U.S. Forest Service set national goals of limiting all-terrain-vehicle use in the country's forests in 2005, and this also meant restricting most motorized travel to official roads or trails, and defining car-camping areas.

The proposal for the Coconino National Forest eliminates 66 percent of areas where car campers and travel trailers could spend the night, reducing it from a majority of the forest to an area a little more than double the size of the Kachina Peaks Wilderness area.

Instead, car campers could camp within 300-foot limits of some forest roads.

Popular camping sites, like those along Freidlein Prairie Road and heading toward Bismarck Lake will remain open. But those on some very rough roads will close.

People heading out to gather firewood will also be granted permission to drive cross-country to get it.

The forest's goals included reducing the number of roads and eliminating multiple roads that go to the same point.

Excluding wilderness areas, a person standing somewhere in the Coconino National Forest is within half a mile of a road about 93 percent of the time.

Under the pending changes, that figure is reduced to 79 percent.

Motorcycle riders are disappointed, said Brian Hawthorne, public lands policy director for a group that advocates for motorized vehicle use on public lands, the BlueRibbon Coalition.

"We understood that we were going to see a huge reduction in roads, and frankly a lot of that is appropriate. But where they failed, absolutely failed, is in failing to plan for motorized trails," he said.

If there's only 20 miles of trail, it's hardly worth bringing a motorcycle to the forest, and riding on roads is a much different experience than trails, Hawthorne said.

Coconino Trail Riders had identified more than 125 miles of trails used by motorcycles in the area.

Hawthorne feels the group's thoughts were ignored, and he says an appeal is likely.

"We have been pounding on the desk. We have been meeting. We have had field trips trying to get them to understand the need for motorized trails," he said.

On the other hand, the Center for Biological Diversity says the plans don't go far enough in restricting where cars, trucks and ATVs can travel.

"If you want to get a quiet forest experience, you are basically forced to head to the backcountry and go to those wilderness areas," said the group's Cyndi Tuell.

The group thinks the agency isn't closing enough roads and dislikes the forest's plan to allow some of the forest's 120,000 hunters to use vehicles to retrieve big game. It also thinks allowing a 300-foot buffer for camping before more precise archaeological surveys are conducted could leave some archaeological sites trampled.

"From a fiscal point of view, the Coconino National Forest today can afford to maintain just 600 miles of roads annually, yet this decision leaves more than 3,100 miles of roads open to public motorized uses," Tuell said. "It's baffling to think that in these lean economic times a forest is planning for a road system it knows it can't afford," Tuell said.

The Coconino's proposal on hunting is different than most other forests in the state because it requires hunters to retrieve game on foot or via packstock across some large parcels of land. Other sections are left open for off-road retrieval by vehicle.

A 2005 Arizona Game and Fish survey found 54 percent of hunters sometimes found ATVs disruptive to their hunts.

The Coconino National Forest proposed to put the off-road rules into place in 2009 when it held public forums on the issue in 2007, but the plans have been delayed.

The Coconino National Forest received more than 1,000 comments on these proposals in the last few years, Supervisor Earl Stewart wrote in his decision, and some of them persuaded the agency to do things such as allow car campers to be more than one vehicle-length from forest roads.

Another big question is public education and enforcement, partly addressed by coming kiosks and maps.

About 97 Forest Service employees will be enforcing the new rules, but it won't be obvious which roads are closed.

The roads that are "closed" won't actually be blocked, obliterated or otherwise marked, partly because the Forest Service expects people wishing to use closed roads could simply pull up and throw aside "road closed" signs.

It will be up to the public in the coming year to pick up free maps outlining which roads officially exist and are open, and which are not.

These rough black-and-white maps will likely need to be paired with other maps to sort out fine details

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