

## Tonto Forest Plans Study Of Impact Of Closing Roads

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By Pete Aleshire  
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After a three-year delay, the Tonto National Forest last week decided to undertake a full-fledged Environmental Impact Statement before deciding which roads to close in a vast network that includes some 5,400 miles of dirt roads in the 3-million-acre forest.

#The decision could stall adoption of a plan by a year or more and drew complaints by some off-road users and praise from environmental groups.

#The Forest Service completed an environmental assessment of the impact of banning cross-country travel and closing hundreds of miles of existing roads several years ago. During meetings in Payson in 2009, most people who attended complained bitterly about almost any closure of existing roads.

#That preliminary plan would have banned most cross-country travel, closed about 280 miles of roads, added about 300 miles of roads based on existing informal "user created" tracks and left in the system some 1,200 miles of roads suggested for closure in previous studies.



An increase in the popularity of off-road vehicles has inflicted environmental damage on many forests. Photo by Max Foster.

#The draft plan would have created four areas open to cross-country travel totaling about 1,400 acres and allowed hunters to go up to 200 yards off established roads to retrieve game.

#That preliminary plan would have left open nearly 1,000 miles of roads criss-crossing the Payson Ranger District and another 1,000 in the Tonto Basin Ranger District. The Pleasant Valley Ranger District would retain a little more than 1,000 miles of open Forest Service Roads.

#Off-roaders and many residents have complained that the closures would make it hard to get around, access favorite campsites, hunt and make use of the forest.

#However, environmental groups praised the Tonto National Forest's decision to undertake the much more time-consuming, expensive and comprehensive study of the environmental impacts of the travel management plan represented by a full environmental impact report.

#“Off-road vehicles decimate fragile desert habitats and watersheds, so we’re glad the Forest Service is doing a more thorough review, as we’ve been urging for five years,” said Cyndi Tuell, with the Center for Biological Diversity. “This recreation system has been extremely badly managed and we hope very much the Service takes this opportunity to right the wrong and fix this situation.”

#Tonto National Forest Supervisor Neil Bosworth said, “all comments provided throughout the process thus far, including those to the 2009 proposed action under the original 2012 Environmental Assessment, as well as input at public meetings, will continue to be considered and may be incorporated into either the proposed action for the EIS or alternatives to that proposed action. We continue to invite the public to share ideas about the forest’s system of roads, trails, and/or areas, review the proposed system, and remain engaged with us as we move towards developing a travel management plan which will best protect our resources and also meet our recreation users’ needs.”

#The preliminary environmental assessment concluded that it would cost about \$7 million annually to adequately maintain the existing network of nearly 5,000 miles of road — enough dirt road to connect Los Angeles and New York. However, the Tonto Forest’s road maintenance budget actually remains less than \$1.6 million.

#Moreover, the Tonto National Forest is also struggling to cope with a projected \$600,000 deficit in its \$5.4 million budget for operating developed sites like campgrounds, boat launching ramps and day use areas. It has accumulated another \$4.5 million in deferred maintenance for those facilities — leaving it with almost no money to maintain its vast network of roads.

#In fact, the Forest Service remains so strapped for road maintenance funds that it simply shut down the road from Strawberry to Fossil Creek, although it’s one of the most popular attractions in the whole forest and draws more than 90,000 visitors annually.

#Congress ordered all the nation’s forests in 2005 to develop travel management plans to come up with a plan to limit the damage done by the explosion in the use of off-road vehicles.

#The Tonto National Forest gets about 6 million visitors annually, including about 500,000 people riding off-road vehicles — making it one of the most heavily used — and abused — forests in the country.

#The neighboring Coconino National Forest and Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests have each already completed work on their travel management plans, including studies of environmental impacts. Those plans banned most off-road travel and designated thousands of miles of open roads. The Coconino ended up with 3,000 miles of open roads and 600 miles of “camping corridors” where

people could drive up to 300 feet off a designated road to find a campsite. The Apache-Sitgreaves also wound up with thousands of miles in its road system, with certain areas of the forest designated for dispersed camping along those roads.

#The explosive increase in the use of off-road vehicles has already inflicted grave environmental damage on many forests. Nationally, the number of off-road users rose from 5 million in 1972 to 51 million in 2000. In Arizona, most of the 1 million off-road vehicle owners live in the Valley, where efforts to protect air quality have already barred most off-road travel and limited the number of dirt roads. As a result, many of those Valley off-roaders head for the dirt roads and unprotected hillsides of the Tonto National Forest.

#Environmental groups note that cross-country travel and the use of rutted, erosion-prone, poorly maintained roads can cause significant environmental damage. That’s particularly true in and around riparian areas, which clog up with silt and mud washed off poorly maintained roads.

#The Tonto National Forest has 21 threatened and endangered species that can be harmed by the impact of roads and off-road vehicles, concluded the Forest Service’s own environmental assessment. That includes Mexican spotted owls, desert bald eagles, Chiricahua leopard frogs, spike dace, loach minnows and a host of other species.

#“Tonto has the worst watershed condition of any forest in the region,” said Tuell, “with more ‘impaired’ watersheds than any other forest in Arizona or New Mexico. Roads and trails are the main cause of watershed impairment and the Forest Service has known this for years. Yet the agency has done virtually nothing to protect our water supply. That has to change.”

#On the other hand, many residents reacted to the draft plan by pointing out that they rely on roads the Forest Service wants to close to access their homes, hunt, take trips and entertain guests. Some noted that the closures could also make it harder for people to get out of their homes ahead of wildfires.

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