

Forest Service confronts another no-win

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Roundup Staff Reporter

Someone needs to resurrect King Solomon and get him to run the U.S. Forest Service. Hard to figure that anyone else can resolve the agonizing choices facing the folks managing 193 million acres of your land — including 3 million acres in the Tonto National Forest.

Hopefully, you recall the story of the wise King Solomon. He is confronted with the claims of two women to a single baby. Unable to discern the real mother, Solomon decreed the baby should be cut in half so each woman would have a share. One woman agreed, the other woman recoiled — and renounced her claim. So Solomon gave the second woman the baby, knowing a real mother would sacrifice her claim to save the child.

The Forest Service faces an achingly similar dilemma in formulating a plan to control destructive ATV off-road recreation in the forest.

An explosion of ATV use has posed a grave challenge to forest managers. The creation of quick, powerful vehicles that can tear

across the landscape has created environmental carnage. Most off-road vehicle users stick to existing roads and trails and behave responsibly, but a dismaying minority have gone rampaging across the countryside, leaving garbage, erosion and wildfires in their wake.

The Tonto National Forest must take drastic action to protect the public's land — not to mention the communities nestled in an increasingly fire-prone forest.

The Tonto National Forest just-released proposed plan will now restrict cross-country vehicle travel except in a handful of open areas. In addition, hunters can still use their ATVs to retrieve animals they've shot within 200 yards of an existing road. Clearly, that will provide vital protection for streams and wildlife, while significantly decreasing the risk some idiot will start a fire that will consume Rim Country communities.

On the other side, the Tonto Forest plan also reopens some 1,200 miles of existing roads

and user-created paths currently shut down to protect the environment.

Unfortunately, the Tonto National Forest has only a fraction of the money it needs to maintain the proposed 5,300-mile-long network of roads. The Forest Service also lacks the resources to keep those roads closed. Moreover, we depend critically on the tourist dollars spent by people who come to Rim Country to drive those roads — not to mention the vital role that dirt road network plays in the ability of the locals to get around.

So once again, the Forest Service finds itself pulling out the saws and slapping the crying baby down on the table. And we who love the forest, find ourselves recoiling from the inevitable choice that confronts us.

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