

Forest Service releases plan to limit cross country travel

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By Pete Aleshire

A long-awaited Forest Service plan will limit cross-country vehicle travel on the 3-million-acre Tonto National Forest, but leave an expanded network of 5,300 miles of roads still open.

More than two years behind schedule, the Tonto National Forest last week released its congressionally-ordered Travel Management Plan to contain the damage done to watersheds, streams, archaeological sites and wildlife by an explosion of ATV off-road vehicle use.

The draft released after years of study adds 1,200 miles of now closed roads and trails to the system in one of the nation's most heavily used national forests.

However, the plan will ban the free-wheeling cross country travel that has added hundreds of miles of informal roads and done damage to streams, wildlife and sensitive sites in recent years.

The plan creates four off-road areas of 1,417 acres that would still allow cross country travel — including a large area between Payson and Phoenix. In addition,

the plan still allows hunters to go off-road to retrieve animals they've killed within 200 yards of an open road.

The road network would leave the 3-million-acre forest with a road density of one mile of road for every square mile of land — which means hardly any land outside of a couple of wilderness areas would lie more than a mile from a road. Studies show that ATV off-road vehicles significantly increase erosion, damage streams, disturb wildlife and increase fire danger.

The Tonto National Forest gets about 6 million visitors annually and by some measures draws more off-road vehicle users than any other national forest.

Nationwide, the number of off-road vehicle users increased from 5 million in 1972 to 51 million in 2000. About 1.1 million Arizona residents say they are off-roaders, with the bulk of them living in the Valley.

Experts say Maricopa County's effort to restrict off-road travel to improve air quality has prompted many off-roaders to shift to Rim Country.

The proposal would leave 982 miles of open roads in the Payson Ranger District and another 987 miles in the Tonto Basin Ranger District.

Many off-road users oppose any limits on off-road travel and complained that the plan would still close about 101 miles of existing roads and trails.

Environmental groups decried the opening of some 1,200 miles of roads and trails now closed, pointing out the Forest Service only has enough money to maintain about 10 percent of the proposed network.

"The plan is a financial disaster as well as an environmental one," said Cyndi Tuell at the Center for Biological Diversity.

She said the environmental study accompanying the plan concluded maintaining the existing

network of 4,200 roads would cost \$6.9 million annually, but the Tonto National Forest has a road maintenance budget of just \$1.6 million annually.

The environmental study accompanying the plan concludes that some 2,500 miles of road would remain at “moderate to high” risk of erosion, including 234 miles of roads with known erosion scars and 93 miles already eroding.

The Forest Service held a series of hearings on the plan in December of 2009, including a heavily attended session in Payson. At that hearing, most people expressed concerns about plans to close roads subject to heavy erosion or along routes likely to affect wildlife and archaeological sites. Many people testifying said they rely on the network of back roads to get around. The tangle of dirt roads in the Tonto National Forest would extend from Los Angeles to New York if laid end to end.

Forest Service planners had promised to release a revised plan two years ago, but budget woes delayed the project. The preliminary plan two years ago proposed adding 700 miles to the existing network instead of 1,200. Only a few miles of newly opened roads lie in the Payson Ranger District.

In the 700 square miles of the Payson Ranger District, the plan calls for the closure of about 39 miles of roads to protect wildlife, archaeological sites and riparian areas. That would leave 225 miles open to passenger vehicles, 471 miles open to high-clearance vehicles, 21 miles open to vehicles less than 50 inches in width and 148 miles open only to Forest Service vehicles — for a total road mileage of 982.

Down in the Tonto Basin, the plan calls for the continued closure of 61 miles of road. The 987 miles of open roadway would include 226 for passenger vehicles, 493 for high-clearance vehicles, one mile for ORVs and 205 miles for administrative uses.

In the Pleasant Valley Ranger District centered around Young, the plan would close 211 miles of road. That would leave 1,091 miles open, including 148 for passenger cars, 548 for high-clearance vehicles, 46 miles for ORVs and 148 miles for administrative use.