



N. Arizona forest releases revised travel plan

February 10, 2011

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) - A northern Arizona forest has revised a travel management plan for thousands of acres south of Grand Canyon National Park, closing one-fifth of roads and leaving in place a provision that lets hunters drive into the forest to retrieve downed elk.

The Kaibab National Forest released its initial plan for the Tusayan Ranger District in 2009, but the regional office ordered a review based on two appeals and said it must include an option to prohibit off-road travel for hunters.

The forest complied but is favoring an alternative that allows elk hunters to travel up to a mile off forest roads to recover elk. Hunters could make only one trip in and out to get the animals and must take the most direct and least-disturbing route, avoiding streams and riparian areas.

Environmentalists contend hunters shouldn't be treated differently than other recreationists and that their permitted access could further harm the land. Kaibab officials said they made an allowance for elk only because of the difficulty in packing the animal and as a compromise.

"We feel that the selected alternative greatly reduces the potential for resource damage over the current condition," said forest spokeswoman Jackie Banks.

Game retrieval has been one of the most polarizing issues for the Kaibab National Forest as officials work toward designating a system of roads and trails that are open to motor vehicle use. In the past, motorized users could pull off forest roads and travel through the forest as they pleased. But the federal government's travel management rule requires officials to largely cut off cross-country travel.

Kaibab officials plan to close 143 roads in the Tusayan district's 709-mile system. They also dropped 28.5 miles of dispersed camping areas and added 16 miles of short roads that can be used to access camping sites.

Cyndi Tuell of the Center for Biological Diversity said allowing motorized game retrieval threatens archaeological sites, creates ruts in the land that can be deepened through erosion and could spread invasive weeds.

The group appealed a proposal to allow hunters in the Kaibab's Williams Ranger District to travel a mile off designated roads, but the appeal was rejected. Tuell said the group is considering an appeal of the Tusayan decision.

"We think it's setting precedent for the state," she said. Game retrieval "is one of our greatest concerns, other than the sheer number of roads."

The Arizona Game and Fish Department says about 90 percent of hunters used a vehicle to retrieve elk in the Tusayan district from 2004 to 2006. The department has advocated for off-road game retrieval across the state, saying it doesn't negatively impact natural resources, and would decrease antlerless elk harvests and the risk of game meat spoiling.

Sam Scarmardo, owner of Sam's Shooters Emporium in Lake Havasu City, said he uses an all-terrain vehicle to retrieve elk but is careful not to damage the land. At 60 years old, he said it would be difficult to load an animal on a wheeled cart and move it up and down steep mountains.

"An average elk runs between 700 and 900 pounds; It's hard to drag that across country unless you cut it up and put it in your backpack," he said. "There has to be a reasonable allowance for hunters to retrieve their big game."

Other forests are considering what's being done on Kaibab forest in guiding their decisions.

Cross-country travel has been prohibited in Prescott National Forest since the 1980s, but its forest plan doesn't address game retrieval. Forest spokeswoman Debbie Maneely said that issue will be addressed when the Coconino and Kaibab forests finalize their plans.

"We'll try to match them as best as we can," she said.

The Coconino National Forest shares three game units with the Kaibab's Williams Ranger District and said it would defer action on a plan for those units to the Kaibab. Elsewhere, the Coconino forest has proposed banning cross country travel for hunters to protect endangered species habitat. But officials are reviewing thousands of comments before making a final decision.

"It's been a challenge because we want to do independent assessments for what's right," said Mike Dechter, who is overseeing the Coconino's travel management plan. "At the same time from a management perspective, it makes sense for us to coordinate what our policies will be."

Prescott and parts of the Coronado forests have issued motor vehicle use maps based on roads already designated through management plans. The rest of Arizona's national forests are expected to issue records of decision or the actual maps later this year.