

After sharp rise in OHV fatalities, official calls for safety education

By DONYELLE KESLER
CRONKITE NEWS SERVICE

PHOENIX - A sharp increase in fatal off-highway vehicle accidents in 2011 has a state official urging riders to take hands-on safety courses and learn the rules.

Those steps are especially important heading into fall, when riders take advantage of cooler temperatures and hunting seasons kick off, said Reuben Gonzalez, a public information officer and law enforcement specialist with the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

"We're trying to get the public to understand that with the increased number of riders there is also an increased number of inexperienced riders and those are the ones that are probably getting injured and in some cases killed," he said.

Arizona had 29 OHV-riding fatalities in 2011, up from eight in 2010, according to Arizona Department of Health Services statistics. OHV accidents also resulted in 1,611 emergency room visits and 409 hospitalizations in 2011.

Gonzalez said officials found that the majority of those involved in OHV accidents were under 18, weren't wearing helmets or other proper equipment or had little to no experience.

"It's like a 15-year-old getting behind the wheel of a car," Gonzalez said. "Without proper training, something bad is bound to happen."



Nora Avery-Page/Courtesy photo

In this April 2008 photo, an off-highway vehicle rides on an prohibited trail in the Tonto National Forest near Mesa. A state official says a spike in fatal OHV accidents in 2011 reinforces the importance of riders taking safety classes.

Plan to permit OHVs in Kaibab forest irks
By CALE OTTENS

Cronkite News Service

WASHINGTON - The Kaibab National Forest this week announced plans to let vehicles go off-road in part of the forest, a proposal that environmentalists fear will harm both wildlife and public land.

Under the plan announced Tuesday, the forest near Flagstaff would allow motorized vehicles to travel 30 feet from any open road. Campers and hunters in the North Kaibab Ranger District would have even more freedom, with campers allowed to go as far as 300 feet off-road and hunters able to drive freely on forest land.

Game and Fish offers an online OHV safety certification course for \$29.50 and, through its website, offers a directory of hands-on safety courses around the state.

Thomas Sanio, an instructor with the ATV Safety Institute, which offers hands-on training, said too often young people are allowed to ride without supervision or an understanding of how to ride safely.

"You put a rider who is too young or not mature enough on a machine that's not set up for them, it's a recipe for disaster," he said.

Marge Dwyer, who administers Arizona State Parks' OHV Ambassadors program, said a lot of people consider riding OHVs "just a sport" and fail to learn rules, regulations and safe-riding techniques.

"People forget that these vehicles are not enclosed," she said. "They don't understand the tipping ratio and put as many people on one vehicle as they possibly can."

OHV Ambassadors take the instruction out to riders, monitoring public lands in groups of two or more and educating OHV users as appropriate.

Arizona doesn't require OHV operators to take a safety education class, but Gonzalez said he'd like to see that change.

"Having someone, especially someone under the age of 18, go through a course like this would better prepare them," he said.

The plan would add 796 spur routes that could be used for camping, in addition to about 16 more miles in the open-road system, according to the decision notice posted by the U.S. Forest Service.

"These additions are important for meeting the demand for motorized camping opportunities, especially in peak times (e.g., holiday weekends and hunting seasons)," the decision notice said.

Forest officials could not be reached for comment Thursday on the plan. But environmental groups quickly attacked the proposal.

The Center for Biological Diversity said the decision could disrupt many hunters' experiences, as well as damage certain wildlife habitats and ruin some portions of the public land.

"Outside of the wilderness, there is not a square mile of forest that doesn't have a road in it," said Cyndi Tuell, the center's Southwest conservation advocate.

She said problems include animals that could be crushed by off-roading vehicles, which can also spread weed seeds that could harm native vegetation that animals rely on for food.

Tuell said she has received calls and emails from hunters who say they no longer enjoy hunting in the Kaibab Forest because of the disruptions from motorized vehicles.

"The Kaibab is one of the most popular elk-hunting forests in the state ... and motorized hunters are disrupting this," she said. "They (forest officials) didn't make any areas that are quiet and enjoyable for the public."

But a spokesman for the Arizona Game and Fish Department disagreed that the policy will inconvenience hunters, saying the new vehicle policy aims to help them in the forest.

"We constantly advocated for hunters to be able to use motorized retrieval of downed big game," said Tom Cadden, the spokesman. But he added that the department is still reviewing the Forest Service proposal.

Tuell said the center is considering appealing the decision, as it has appealed similar off-road rules suggested for the Kaibab's other two districts. In both of those cases, forest officials wound up implementing the rules to some degree, allowing motorized vehicles off-road in some portions of the land.