



## Agency's waiving of fees, environmental study for OHV rally draws protest

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An environmental group is questioning the Forest Service's decision to waive permit fees and forgo an environmental analysis for sponsors of an off-highway vehicle rally going on this week in eastern Arizona.

The ninth annual ATV Outlaw Trail Jamboree is taking place on some national forest tracts that are still recovering from 2011's Wallow fire and could potentially harm forest resources, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

The event -- which began Tuesday and runs through tomorrow -- draws hundreds of all-terrain vehicle (ATV) enthusiasts to the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. While the organizers, the Apache County ATV Roughriders, have had to pay for a special use permit up until now, this year's jamboree doesn't qualify as a commercial event because the jamboree is no longer charging participants for trail rides.

Says the jamboree website, "due to the change in our forest service permit from commercial to non-commercial, our jamboree registration fee no longer includes costs that were previously associated with trail rides."

The event's \$150 registration fee, the site says, will go to support efforts to create a permanent trail system in the White Mountains from the towns of Clifton and Morenci to Payson, a distance of about 200 miles.

The center argues that because participants are charged a fee, the jamboree should be treated as a commercial event, which under Forest Service policy requires a special use permit.

"They're saying the event has changed; it's no longer a commercial event," said Cyndi Tuell, the group's Southwest conservation advocate. "It's the same event that's been happening the last eight years, only bigger. Nothing has changed. It's just grown in numbers."

The Forest Service has required a special use permit for other activities, including guided horseback rides and a wolf education hike, Tuell said.

The jamboree schedule posted on the event website says events will include group ATV rides into Saffell Canyon and other areas, an ATV rodeo and a "treasure hunt."

In a statement prepared in response to questions from Greenwire, the service defended its decision not to require a special use permit for the event. "Since no fees will be charged for trail rides on National Forest System lands, there will be no commercial activities on National Forest System lands," the agency said.

The agency declined to disclose exactly how much the group would have had to pay for a special use permit, but officials said such permits typically include a fee of 3 percent of the gross revenues from the event.

Tuell said she is also concerned about large numbers of ATVs in areas still recovering from the Wallow fire, which burned 538,000 acres last year. And the treasure hunt, she said, will encourage ATV riders to drive off-road.

“The Forest Service is turning a blind eye to the impacts that a large, organized motorized event could have on fragile habitat for Mexican spotted owls, Mexican gray wolves and dozens of other species already hurt by the Wallow fire,” she said, adding that the agency should have conducted an environmental analysis of the event’s possible resource impacts.

Jamboree participants and any other OHV riders traveling in the area burned by the Wallow fire are only allowed to ride on roads and trails marked with white arrow road signs, according to the Forest Service.

“Cross-country motorized travel is prohibited to the general public in the Wallow Fire burned area,” the service said in a statement. “Any person who does not comply with this prohibition can be cited.”

Overall, the agency added, trail use during the event shouldn’t be much different from typical motorized use.

“Motorized recreation on designated roads and trails is a legitimate use of the national forests,” the service said. “The ATV Jamboree’s use of these roads and trails is no different than other motorized recreationists.”

Calls to the Apache County ATV Roughriders were not returned. The jamboree website encourages riders to stay on designated trails, especially during the treasure hunt. “Please park your ATV on the trail and walk to the geo-cache,” the group says. “We want to discourage cross-country riding in any way!”