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ATV use may be cut in national forest

Eastern Oregon - Off-road fans are angry about a plan to close 4,200 miles of roads that officials say need protection

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BAKER CITY -- Only bicyclists, hikers and horseback riders would be permitted on much of eastern Oregon's largest national forest under a U.S. Forest Service proposal to ban virtually all motorized traffic from more than 4,200 miles of roads.

The suggested action on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest has come under heavy fire from hunters, outdoor enthusiasts and advocates for off-road vehicles.

"I'm pretty bitter about it," said retired businessman and avid fisherman Gene Erwin, 78, of La Grande. "We pay them to maintain the national forest, so what do they do? They kick us out of it."

Judy Wing, a Wallowa-Whitman spokeswoman in Baker City, said the proposal is intended to reduce sediment damage to streams of wild fish and harassment to big game. It grew out of a travel management rule handed down from Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., that ultimately will require compliance from every national forest in the nation.

Under the proposal, ATVs, motorcycles and full-sized vehicles could be prohibited on 4,261 miles of the Wallowa-Whitman's roads -- about 46 percent of the 2.3 million acre national forest's 9,000 road miles, said Dan Ermovick, a recreation manager for the Wallowa-Whitman.

Ermovick said reining in cross-country ATV activity is becoming necessary because:

Silting of streams, damage to fish habitat and harassment of elk herds caused by ATV riders traveling cross-country and cruising roads.

Resource damage to environmentally sensitive spots. In the picturesque Elkhorn Mountains near Baker City, ATV riders sometimes veer off the roads and tear up meadows, he said.

Safety issues. Mixing ATVs with bigger cars and trucks can be risky to ATV riders. At least 100 miles of existing forest roads put ATVs at special risk, he said.

Some national forests haven't begun the travel management process, but others have completed it with little fanfare.

The Umatilla National Forest, for example, got through the process with few problems because it already had a policy that forest roads were closed to motor vehicles unless designated open. It's the opposite in the Wallowa-Whitman -- all roads are open unless designated closed.

The Forest Service said the proposal isn't budget-driven. The fiscal 2008 road maintenance budget for Oregon and Washington is \$28.1 million, up slightly from \$27.4 million in 2007. The 2006 road maintenance

budget was \$21.6 million.

One reason for the Forest Service's concern has been an explosion in sheer numbers of ATVs and other off-road vehicles. Off-road vehicle numbers have jumped from 5 million in 1972 to more than 51 million now.

Former Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth was determined to corral "unmanaged recreation" in the national forests, Ermovick said. The Forest Service proposed vehicle regulations in July 2004 and last year approved a schedule for implementing the new rules.

Seeking compromise

Larry McLaud, spokesman for the La Grande-based Hells Canyon Preservation Council, said prolific road construction in the 1970s and '80s left the Wallowa-Whitman with a greater density of logging roads than necessary. ATV impacts on wildlife and anadromous fish are sometimes severe, he said.

But 65-year-old Larry Cribbs of La Grande said he and his wife have seen no abuses during many years of riding ATVs an average of 2,500 miles a year each on national forest roads. They seldom encounter other ATVs, he said.

"They say ATVs are tearing up the world; I see no evidence of it," said Cribbs, adding that the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Department declined to document specific ATV abuses for him when he asked them to do so.

A middle ground on the issue is being sought by the 15-member Baker County Alternative Travel Management Plan Committee, which inspected dozens of old logging spur roads, most of them short, dead-end tracks that are becoming impassible, said rancher and committee chairwoman Jan Kerns.

Though the committee recommended the closure of such roads, it also suggested reopening others and some ATV trails that have been closed, she said. Members also want some huckleberry and mushroom gathering areas and firewood cutting sites to remain open to motorized vehicles, she said.

"What we've tried to do is find a balance," Kerns said. "There are some people who don't want anything closed, but we can't do that."

Opponents worry that widespread closures could concentrate visitors into limited areas and transform some major roads into "hazardous freeways."

"It is going to make so much land unavailable to the average hunter that where you can hunt is going to be like downtown Portland," Erwin said. "It is going to crowd all the hunters together."

Ermovick said about 3,000 miles of the Wallowa-Whitman's roads would remain open to ATVs. Wintertime snowmobile use would continue because they generally operate in deep snow at elevations above wildlife winter range, he said.

Full-size motor vehicles have been prohibited on many of the roads proposed for closure to ATVs since the early 1990s, Ermovick noted. Few forest visitors know that, however, because of the absence of gates, barricades and "road closed" signs, and many visitors have been driving those roads in full-size vehicles all these years, he said.

A six-month public comment period on the Forest Service proposal closed Nov. 16, after triggering 1,500 e-mails and 500 letters, plus petitions, telephone calls and even billboards, Ermovick said. A planning team will assemble a set of Forest Service alternatives to its original proposal by June, he said.

But it may be 2009 before revisions to the new travel plan are finished, and the following year before the new

rules -- whatever they turn out to be -- go into effect, Wing said.

"We are a long way from a final decision," she said.

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