

# East Oregonian

## USFS roadblock: Motorized vehicle ban is long overdue

By Brett Brownscombe

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The U.S. Forest Service's development of a travel management plan that prohibits cross-country motorized vehicle use and restricts use in sensitive areas is long overdue.

This issue is about sound planning, fairness, and managing motorized recreation to a reasonable scale on the last of America's commons ... our public lands. To still have common land is a special thing, especially for most of us who can't afford to buy our own big chunk of paradise in the West. These lands and waters are the relatively wild places all Americans can wander without fear of trespass.

The challenge: how to ensure all public interests get along.

The extreme interests who claim the Forest Service's proposal is an attempt to shut down the forests and keep people out seem to view public lands as single-purpose ORV playgrounds, as if they alone own these lands and somehow deserve all of the rights of access with none of the responsibility of sharing. They banter for "open forests" without limits on their "freedom of choice."

Well, what natural living animal would oppose freedom?

Who wouldn't want their favorite interest advanced as much as possible?

If every acre of public land were open to logging, grazing, mining, hunting, or wilderness designation at all times of the year, that would make plenty of timber, livestock, mining, hunting, and wilderness advocates happy, right? Wrong. It wouldn't work collectively. Hatfields vs. McCoys ring a bell? Wilderness Nuts vs. Big Timber?

Not all interests are compatible on every piece of ground at every time of the year. Accommodations are made and management frameworks forged in an attempt to allow everyone to get along in relative peace while still keeping the land healthy.

Over the years and over considerable battles, timber, grazing, mining, hunting, wilderness interests and more have fought to extend their influence and presence on public land. Along the way, and not without sacrifice, each of these interests have seen limitations on their freedom of choice - restrictions on when, where, and how they can do what they like to do on America's common land.

Granted, the Forest Service and public as a whole are still struggling to find a balance that is fair to all public interests, and moreover, the health of the land.

But what should not be open to debate or labels of unfairness is that the time has come for ORV users - a relative newcomer in terms of historic public land users, with growing numbers and impacts - to accept the same type of shared-use framework to which all other users have already compromised in some way, shape or form.

Contrary to the cries of over-regulation from extreme ORV users, the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest has always maintained a policy that every acre is open to motorized use unless posted closed. ORV users have faced few limitations, and the landscape bears this out. Around northeast Oregon, it doesn't take long to see or hear first-hand about wet meadows destroyed by mud-bogging, livestock fences cut or gates left open by ATV riders, elk spooked

due to an off-trail motor at a critical juncture during a hunt, or rutted tracks filled with noxious weeds across formerly intact grasslands or hillsides.

Certainly not all ORV users are irresponsible, and the Forest Service's proposal more than accommodates continued responsible use. But the impacts of motorized use are far from minor and trivial.

Congress and both recent democratic and republican administrations have consistently shorted the Forest Service with budgets that come nowhere close to what is needed to maintain the extensive 9,000-mile Wallowa-Whitman road system (enough to stretch from Baker City to Liverpool, England, and back).

Erosion into streams, poorly-planned roads into critical wildlife areas, and crumbling infrastructure are the consequences.

This does not even include the hundreds of miles of unauthorized, user-created routes that the Forest Service has passively watched motorized users carve into the landscape over the last decade or more.

To suggest it is reasonable to maintain this road system-even the illegally created routes-as open access for primarily one interest group is not only impractical but unfair and harmful to fish, wildlife, water quality, the taxpayer, and all user groups who have already accepted the wild notion that their use ... their freedom ... comes with limits.

The Forest Service's proposal properly brings all interests to the table to figure out which roads should remain prioritized and maintained for motorized use, and which should not.

ORV users will get a secure, planned network of open routes designated for their benefit, while fish, wildlife, water, timber, livestock, hunting, and other public values are protected. Sounds like a fair shake to me.

What would be unfair is allowing ORV users preserved cross-country access to as much of the forest as they'd like no matter what the impacts, when all others have already accepted limitations.

The public should not stand idly by while extreme ORV interests trumpet a vision of "freedom" that tramples upon, dismisses, and refuses to share with other interests on America's common lands.

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