

Arizona Wildlife Federation Federal Travel Management Planning

Arizona's public lands are the key to developing and sustaining healthy fish and wildlife populations and high quality habitats within the State. They also provide primary recreational opportunities for outdoors enthusiasts who hunt, fish, hike, camp, and watch wildlife on federal public lands within the State. Implementing proper management of habitats and providing appropriate public access to public lands for recreational opportunities are top conservation priorities for the Arizona Wildlife Federation (AWF). The AWF considers these actions essential in conserving and sustaining healthy fish, wildlife, and habitat resources for current and future generations of Arizona's citizens and out of state visitors.

The number of off-highway vehicle (OHV) users in the U.S. has climbed tenfold in the past 32 years, from approximately 5 million in 1972 to 51 million in 2004. The Forest Service manages more than 300,000 miles of road and 35,000 miles of trail for motor vehicle use. More than 11 million people using OHVs visited national forest's and grasslands in 2004. In Arizona registered OHV's has grown from 51,453 in 1998 to 230,000 in 2006. It is estimated that there are 350,000 OHV's in the State. Arizona's population has expanded 20% since 1998 (4.9 million, 1998 – 5.9 million, 2005). This population expansion is continuing and increasing the users of public lands throughout the State. While many people ride responsibly, some riders leave lasting impacts by traveling off roads and trails and creating unauthorized routes. Unmanaged OHV use affects wetlands and wildlife habitat, erodes soils, damages cultural resources and spreads invasive species.

**The chief of the Forest Service had this to say recently about OHV use:
“You don't have to go far to see it. I could show you slide after slide—tire tracks running through wetlands; riparian areas churned into mud; banks collapsed and bleeding into streams; ruts in trails so deep you can literally fall in; and sensitive meadows turned into dustbowls. Water quality deteriorates, soil erodes, and native plant communities decline, partly because invasive weeds are spread by tires going where they shouldn't be going. Such use also threatens habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, like the desert tortoise in areas east of here. Noise alone is a huge issue. Noise can also pit users against each other or users against homeowners; it's maybe the single biggest source of social conflict we have when it comes to outdoor recreation. This isn't just a matter of a few user conflicts or a few user-created trails here and there—not anymore. In 2003, we figure we had more than 14,000 miles of user-created trails on the National Forest System. That's a lot of unmanaged use, and it costs a lot to repair. It can lead to lasting damage.”**

The Forest Service (FS) and some Bureau of Land Management (BLM) units are currently engaged in extensive Travel Management planning efforts throughout Arizona. The Travel Management plans will be identifying the appropriate densities and locations of roads and trails open for motorized vehicle use and what types of vehicles are legal for use. They will also determine whether Off Highway Vehicle (OHV) use can occur and if appropriate, what areas would be open to OHV use. In addition, decisions will be made on where dispersed camping is acceptable, and whether motorized cross country retrieval of big game can occur. The outcome of these decisions are of vital importance to the recreational users of FS and BLM public lands within Arizona and to the AWF in its mission to enhance, manage, and protect wildlife and wildlife habitat.

The AWF strongly supports the development, implementation and enforcement of comprehensive Travel Management plans in Arizona. The AWF also advocates that the following recommendations be given full consideration in the planning process and strongly encourages that these recommendations be incorporated into the plans to protect Arizona's valuable natural resources such as fish and wildlife populations and their important habitats.

- Fish and wildlife populations and all the important habitats they depend on to meet their life requirements must be recognized as critical natural resource components of these public lands and all travel management decisions must reflect consideration of these valuable assets.**
- The Arizona public, particularly outdoor recreational users, need to be notified and have the opportunity for direct involvement in the Travel Management planning process and public decision making processes to insure that valuable wildlife and fish habitats, appropriate levels of public recreational access and recreational areas (e.g., dispersed camping areas) are identified and appropriately managed.**
- Current density of roads and trails open to motorized vehicle use within many FS and BLM management units are excessive and often exceed greater than 5 miles of open road per section. The AWF strongly supports reducing open road and trail density used by motorized vehicles to no more than two miles of open roads and trails per section which is in line with the standards and guidelines developed in several of the current Forest Service Land Management Plans in Arizona (e.g., Apache-Sitgreaves NF -Land Management Plan). These guidelines were developed by professional resource managers in response to research that has identified the adverse impacts of high open road densities and their use by motorized vehicle and human activity to wildlife and fish populations and habitats, and other natural resources**
- Motorized vehicle travel by all vehicle types including OHVs should be limited to only designated roads and trails identified in the Travel Management planning process. Cross country travel should not be allowed except for identified specific needs (e.g., implementation of habitat improvement projects, hunter retrieval of harvested big game animals,**

- livestock permittee facilities maintenance) that are fully analyzed in the Travel Management process and in which specific regulations for use are established.
- Solitude and “quiet areas” free from motorized vehicle use are very important components of many outdoor recreational user’s experiences on public lands. In addition, areas free from motorized vehicle activity are of key importance for maintaining wildlife habitat effectiveness and limiting human / vehicle disturbance in critical wildlife areas and seasonal periods (e.g., wintering areas, calving –fawning periods). These factors, for example, are the reason for which programs such as the “Wildlife Habitat Area -Quiet Area” on the Apache-Sitgreaves NF and other similar programs (e.g., Coconino NF) were developed. These programs and other programs that provide areas free from motorized vehicle use including OHVs should be maintained and potentially expanded where motorized vehicle use has been determined to impact wildlife/fish habitats, other natural resources values (e.g., soils, water, vegetation), and recreational user opportunities. Motorized retrieval of big game should not be permitted in these areas.
 - Dispersed camping should be allowed within each National Forest and BLM Resource Area and should reflect the use patterns already established by forest recreational users where the uses are consistent with the protection of important wildlife/fish habitats and other natural resource values.
 - Motorized cross country retrieval of hunter harvested large big game animals (i.e., elk, deer, black bear, bighorn sheep), particularly elk, by OHVs should be given high priority consideration in the travel management planning process in respect to the objective of minimizing the loss of valuable game meat and accommodating disabled hunters who may have limited assistance. Retrieval of large big game animals should be limited to a one time authorization for permitted hunters during their permitted hunt, and should allow only “one trip in and out” by an a motorized vehicle to retrieve their big game animal.
 - Signing of roads and trails to be left open for motorized vehicle use by the public must be accurate, thorough, and understandable by recreational users. Established travel management regulations must also be comprehensive, understandable by the public, and effectively and consistently enforced by the FS, BLM, and their cooperators (e.g., AGFD). These elements will be essential to the long term success of the Travel Management program.
 - Expanded public education and outreach programs should also be implemented as part of the Travel Management Program. The programs should be designed to help the public better understand the rationale and need for the travel management decisions and regulations. The programs should also clearly articulate that the primary objectives of the Travel Management plans and regulations are to protect natural resource values on FS and BLM lands such as fish/wildlife populations and their habitats while providing the public recreational access and motorized vehicle use opportunities.

