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Curry Joins Fight Over OHV Impacts in N.M. Mountains

[By Susan Montoya Bryan](#)

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The head of the New Mexico Environment Department has joined the debate over whether dozens of miles of routes in northern New Mexico's Jemez Mountains should be closed to vehicles.

A group of environmentalists and landowners has petitioned the U.S. Forest Service to close 27 routes, saying they are concerned that continued use by off-roaders would cause more erosion and have negative effects on wildlife.

Environment Secretary Ron Curry toured part of the Jemez Mountains last Friday and vowed this week to continue monitoring the area, where he said streams have been "severely damaged."

"We have concerns about the damaging effects of off-road vehicle use on water quality and streams in the Santa Fe National Forest," Curry said.

He sent a letter Wednesday to Santa Fe Forest Supervisor Dan Jiron, saying the forest must address damage to the watershed and ensure that motorized routes do not compromise the state's surface water quality standards.

"We request that the (Santa Fe National Forest) address these impacts in its closure of specific motorized routes and that decisions regarding road closures be made as quickly as possible to address these threats," the letter states.

Dolores Maese, a spokeswoman for the forest, said Jiron received the letter and the forest is compiling information to respond to the citizens' petition.

Landowners, environmentalists and off-roaders have been butting heads over travel management planning in New Mexico and other states as the U.S. Forest Service tries to decide which areas should be designated for travel by motorcycles, four-wheelers and other vehicles.

The Santa Fe forest is in the process of developing its travel management plan, which will include the Jemez Ranger District.

Kevin Stillman, one resident who signed the petition, argued there are existing areas in the Jemez Mountains that are off-limits to vehicles but people continue to use those routes.

"You can't go anywhere without seeing tracks and trails. You can't go anywhere without hearing them. Every where you look you see signs," he said. "It's not just the dirt bikes, it's the four-wheelers, the people in general and it's just a free for all."

Off-road enthusiasts contend the routes targeted by the petition — which they say is full of "wild accusations" — make up only a fraction of the Santa Fe Forest's surface area. They also argue erosion is a natural process and can be found on other parts of the forest that see no motorized vehicles.

Other residents who use the trails for hiking and biking are concerned that if motorized users — specifically motorcyclists — are kept out of the area, the trails will fall into disrepair. Many of the motorcyclists who frequent the Jemez Mountains are known for maintaining the area's hundreds of miles of trails.

"The image that was created by that petition was that it's this road-warrior place where people are out of control and it's nonstop motorized vehicle use. That's not true," said Beth Perry, a resident who with her husband, Lee, enjoys running and biking the trails.

Perry noted the forest is managed for many uses and said it's enjoyed in different ways by different types of people.

"While I have certainly seen evidence of OHV enthusiasts who have misbehaved, I have encountered just as many ill-mannered hikers, hunters, mountain bikers, equestrians and picnickers," she wrote in a recent letter to the editor. "To me, the correct approach to protecting our trails and forest is not to ban those who a vocal minority views as distasteful, but to educate everyone in trail etiquette and environmental responsibility."

