

Offroad Hordes Vastly Inflated

by Bob Funkhouser, Co-Author, "Off-Road Vehicle Recreation in New Mexico"

Because Senate Bill 379 gives the state Department of Game and Fish responsibility for managing off-road motorized recreation, it is imperative that the new management, as well as the public, have accurate data on this issue.

A recent article, "Off-Highway Vehicle Fans Say Concerns Unheeded," quoted Mark Werkmeister, president of the New Mexico Off-Highway Vehicle Alliance, to the effect that 26 percent of New Mexicans are off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreationists. This figure is based on a 2008 U.S. Forest Service telephone survey which asked several dozen questions, one of which was "Did you drive off-road for recreation in the last 12 months using a four-wheel drive, ATV or motorcycle?"

Many people who drive their SUV or other 4-wheel drive vehicle to a National Forest for recreation would answer yes to such a general question, even if their main recreation activities were hiking, camping or other non-motorized pursuit. Indeed, the survey results show that of those who answered yes, 76 percent view or photograph nature, 48 percent hike, 37 percent camp, 34 percent mountain bike, 20 percent backpack, or engage in one or more of some 50 different activities.

Let's look at two other surveys and two other sources of data to see if Werkmeister's claim can be corroborated.

The Forest Service conducts on-the-ground interviews with visitors and documents their recreational activities in the "National Visitor Use Monitoring Program." The most recent data (2000-2003) for New Mexico shows that of the estimated 2 million annual visits, just 3.6 percent were for "OHV Use."

A 2007 survey of the Southwest Region (Arizona, New Mexico, and small parts of Texas and Oklahoma) by University of New Mexico economists, the Forest Service and the Rocky Mountain Research Station found that 3.3 percent of respondents engage in "Off-highway vehicle driving."

A 2001 study commissioned by an OHV group in Colorado determined the number of households participating in ATV, dirt bike and four-wheel recreation to be 90,647. Scaling that figure for New Mexico's smaller population gives a total of 36,739 households. Because there are often multiple OHV participants per household, (2.5 for ATVs, 2.5 for dirt bikes and 1.5 for 4-wheelers, based on a 2002 Utah study), 36,739 households equates to 72,926 individuals or 4.9 percent of the population.

New Mexico requires non-street legal OHVs used for recreation to be registered. DOT records show 18,000 registered ATVs and 2,000 registered dirt bikes. According to an OHV expert, about half of the ATVs in the state are registered. If the same is true with dirt bikes, then there are about 36,000 ATVs and 4,000 dirt bikes. No data exists for four-wheelers but, based on the Colorado study, the estimate is 20,000. That's 60,000 vehicles, enough to equip 4 percent of New Mexico's population age 16 and older.

The four estimates above range from 3.3 percent to 4.9 percent, dramatically lower than 26 percent. The disparity is so great that a reasonable person must reject the alliance's claim in favor of the lower estimates.

Another factual error is the statement by Werkmeister that "in Arizona, all (advisory) board members have to be motorized recreation enthusiasts." The truth is that five of the seven members are from an OHV organization or group.

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