

OHVs: Santa Fe forest officials mull emergency closures to protect wildlife (05/14/2009)

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April Reese, E&E Western reporter

SANTA FE NATIONAL FOREST, N.M. -- Kevin Stillman idles his pickup along the edge of Forest Road 268, surveying a tangle of single-track branching out in three directions, loosely resembling a chicken's foot.

"This is part of the problem," said Stillman, who lives just around the bend on private land within the forest. "There's a trail there, and a trail there, and another over there."

The network of roads and trails -- many of them old logging roads, but some, like the dirt bike trails branching into the pines off this section of F.R. 268, cut by off-roaders themselves -- is damaging soils, stripping away vegetation and fragmenting habitat for wildlife, Stillman said.

He is among a group of landowners and environmental advocates who recently filed a petition with Santa Fe National Forest officials seeking the closure of 27 routes here in the Jemez Ranger District, one of the forest's most popular areas for off-highway vehicles, or OHVs.

The petition, submitted by 69 landowners and citizens and five environmental groups, argues that irresponsible OHV use in the area, about a 40-minute drive from Los Alamos, is disturbing habitat for the state-protected Jemez Mountains salamander and the federally protected Mexican spotted owl. Motorized recreation is also causing "considerable, unacceptable, undue and significant damage and impacts" to vegetation, soils and air and water quality, according to the petition.

Stillman, who is leading the charge to close the trails, said barring OHV use on the routes is the only way to prevent further habitat damage and allow the land to recover.

"This petition is to get the Forest Service to do their job," he said. He cites an [executive order](#) issued by President Nixon in 1972 that requires federal land managers to address environmental damage and social conflict resulting from OHV use.



Sante Fe National Forest managers will consider an emergency petition to close some OHV trails that critics say are destroying fragile forest habitats. Photo by April Reese.

But even if forest officials agree to close the trails, critics remain concerned that the agency will not be able to enforce the closures. In some areas, OHVs have simply bypassed gated roads, creating new access points.

Stillman, who once served on a now-dissolved state OHV board, said the district's single law enforcement officer, who also enforces federal rules on two other districts in the forest, as well as in the adjacent Valles Caldera National Preserve, already has difficulty keeping up with OHV infractions. "There's very little enforcement," he said.

Gordon Spingler of the Blackfeather Trail Preservation Alliance in Los Alamos agreed that enforcement is inadequate but emphasized that most OHV users ride responsibly. He speculated that critics' concerns about wildlife might be an attempt to shut down motorized use in the district. "They'll never admit it publicly, but their goal is to do away with OHVs," he said.

The tussle over OHV use in the Santa Fe National Forest is emblematic of OHV conflicts across the country, and especially in the West, home to most of the nation's federal lands. OHV use in national forests has increased from about 3 million motorized visitors 15 years ago to 11 million riders today.

In the Jemez Ranger District, which attracts OHV enthusiasts from as far away as Albuquerque, about two-and-a-half hours away, "it's just been growing," said Linda Riddle, district ranger for the Jemez Ranger District.

Travel management planning

Like other national forests around the country, the Santa Fe National Forest is crafting a travel management plan to limit OHV use to a designated trail system. As part of that process, the district is considering closing some trails included in the petition, Riddle said, although she emphasized that the analysis of trail impacts on wildlife is not yet finished.

"I think in some areas, we're definitely going to try to avoid these habitats unless it's a very important transportation route," Riddle said. "I'm not exactly sure how it's all going to come out in the end."

A draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the plan will be out by the end of the year, with a final plan to be issued three to six months later. Riddle said she does not see any need to close trails in habitat areas before then.

"Right now, I haven't seen anything that's so bad that we have to close it now," she said.

Spingler said he agrees that some trails need to be closed, but that the travel management planning process is the right venue for making those decisions, not an emergency closure petition.

The Forest Service is doing "a very logical, good study" of the impacts of motorized use on wildlife, he added.

Once the final travel management plan is issued, restoring closed roads and trails could be a challenge. "We don't get a very big trails budget, so we'll probably do all of it with volunteers," Riddle said, adding that maintenance needs -- and costs -- will go down as closed trails are restored.

A decision on the emergency petition should be reached within a few weeks, Riddle said.