

Santa Fe New Mexican

Conservation group gains free access to Forest Service records

By | The Associated Press

10/17/2007

A conservation group won its two-year battle to get information without charge on the damage caused by off-road vehicles and unmaintained roads on national forests around the West.

The U.S. Forest Service had refused to waive fees for providing the information, so Wildlands CPR sued under the Freedom of Information Act. The Forest Service relented in a consent decree filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Missoula, Mont.

The information to be provided includes timber sale records, policies for off-road vehicles, watershed analyses, geographic information system records and other material from 84 national forests, said David Bahr, attorney for the Western Environmental Law Center in Eugene, Ore.

Wildlands CPR expects the information to show the numbers and damage caused by unauthorized roads are growing, which will help to inform the public as the Forest Service develops new off-road vehicle policies on each national forest, Bahr said.

Bahr noted that before leaving office, former Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth called damage caused by off-road vehicles one of the top threats to the national forests.

"This information makes up the most comprehensive collection of baseline data regarding road and motor vehicle impacts on Forest Service lands in the West," Bethanie Walder, executive director of Wildlands CPR, said in a statement.

"Release of this information will show what the agency knows, and what it doesn't know about the extent of damage unmanaged off-road vehicles and decaying roads are inflicting on public land, water and wildlife."

The Forest Service did not immediately return telephone calls for comment.

Transcripts of status conferences on the case indicated U.S. District Judge Donald W. Molloy was frustrated by the Forest Service's continued refusal to provide the information for free, as called for in the Freedom of Information Act.

"I really think that there's some games being played here" by the Forest Service, Molloy said. "And frankly, I'm sick of it. And we end up wasting so much money for the taxpayers when this stuff is all about an informed citizenry being able to comment on what the Forest Service is doing."

Bahr said the Forest Service never indicated how much it wanted to charge for the information.