

April 13, 2004

Mr. Dale Bosworth  
Chief  
U.S. Forest Service  
1400 Independence Ave., SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Bosworth:

The undersigned organizations and the millions of Americans we represent are encouraged by the announcement that the Forest Service will develop new policies and regulations designed to address the growing negative impacts caused by unmanaged off-road vehicle use. We urge the agency to propose and implement aggressive reform that first and foremost safeguards natural resources and the many benefits that our National Forests provide to millions of Americans who use them for purposes other than off-road vehicle recreation.

You have acknowledged that unmanaged off-road vehicle use is one of the four greatest threats to the long-term health of our National Forests. In fact, the magnitude of this threat is even greater when one considers the role that dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and other off-road vehicles play in fragmenting wildlife habitat and spreading invasive weeds – two of the other threats you have identified. The agency is well aware of the wide range of impacts to the land, air and water quality, wildlife and habitat, and the experiences of millions of Americans who visit National Forests annually for nonmotorized recreation.

These problems are exacerbated by the fact that the agency has a woefully inadequate number of law enforcement officers to respond to burgeoning demands. The average law enforcement ranger is responsible for more than 460,000 acres – an area more than half the size of the State of Delaware (776,960 acres). Addressing this problem requires at least two steps. First, the agency must develop regulations that facilitate effective enforcement on the ground. Second, the Service must request additional funding from Congress to boost the number of full-time law enforcement officers nationwide.

Executive Orders (11644 and 11989) provide clear direction for public land management agencies to develop effective regulations for managing off-road vehicle use. While some of that direction has been incorporated in current regulations, those regulations have not been followed consistently from Forest to Forest and they are not comprehensive and strong enough to address growing off-road vehicle problems. With this regulatory change, the Forest Service has an opportunity to make off-road vehicle regulations more clear and explicit, and to provide a consistent set of rules that all Forests must meet.

Many of our organizations have long supported the broad policy changes outlined by the Forest Service to date. Strengthening current regulations to prohibit cross-country motorized travel and limit dirt bikes and ATVs to designated roads and off-road vehicle routes clearly marked as open for their use will address fundamental policy needs. Although these policy changes will be beneficial, it is critical that the Forest Service take additional steps to ensure basic protections for public land, wildlife and other users of these special places. These steps, many of which reflect requirements in the Executive Orders, include:

- Establishing a two-year timeline for implementing this plan, after which any forest that has not completed designations and closed renegade roads/routes will allow motorized recreational use only on roads/ORV routes that have been analyzed and then designated for such use.
- Designating roads and routes for off-road vehicle travel through a site-specific and public process under the National Environmental Policy Act. Renegade roads/routes created by users without authorization will be closed until full analysis is completed to determine whether they can be designated without endangering natural resources, public safety, and/or the experience of other users. Renegade roads/routes that will be permanently closed must be restored.
- Authorizing off-road vehicle use only in a manner that protects natural resources, environmental values (e.g. quiet, landscape character), public safety and the experience of other forest users. The agency has a positive obligation to analyze new recreational technologies/activities before they are allowed to determine whether or not they are compatible with this goal and, if they are, at what levels and where. The agency does not have an obligation to allow all forms of recreation to occur on Forest Service lands.
- Prohibiting the use of off-road vehicles in wilderness quality lands such as roadless/unroaded areas and wilderness study areas.
- Authorizing off-road vehicle use only to the extent that effective monitoring and enforcement are annually funded, implemented and used to determine appropriate levels of continued off-road vehicle use.
- Protecting traditional foot/horse trails from motorized use: motorized vehicles may only travel on roads and off-road vehicle routes (ORV routes) designated in a public planning process and specifically engineered and constructed for motorized travel.
- Creating a consistent set of minimum off-road vehicle regulations, and enforcement and monitoring standards that all National Forests must meet, while allowing individual forests to develop or maintain more protective measures.
- Developing specific regulations that address snowmobiles and other motorized over-snow vehicles.

Simply issuing a new regulation restricting cross-country travel and requiring off-road vehicles to remain on roads and routes will not address the enormity of the problems caused by off-road vehicle recreation. In order to increase the likelihood that new regulations will more effectively control this use and protect natural resources, wildlife and varied recreational opportunities for all Americans, the Forest Service must incorporate this comprehensive set of common sense policy reforms into any proposed rule.

We applaud the Forest Service for taking the initiative to address this serious and growing problem. We appreciate your willingness to consider these recommendations and look forward to working with you in the months ahead to enact and implement strong reform.

Sincerely,

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