



Forest Service unveils new plan for motorized uses

by K.C. Mehaffey | June 7, 2016, 6:59 p.m.

Outdoors



Photo provided

A motorcycle travels on the Chelan Ranger District's Foggy Dew Trail.

MORE INFO

For more information

Visit: <http://wwrld.us/MotorizedPlan>
Attend an open house from 5 to 6:30 p.m.:

<> June 23, Apple Annie's,
Cashmere

<> June 24, Okanogan County PUD,
Okanogan

WENATCHEE — The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest is proposing to close cross-country travel and decommissioned roads to all motorized vehicles, but allow motorized access to many dispersed campsites and open 350 miles of roads to street-legal ATVs.

The proposed changes are part of the agency's preferred alternative in a newly-released Environmental Assessment for motorized travel, which is now available for review and comment.

The Environmental Assessment is just the first part of a Travel Management Plan, which will eventually determine where on the 4.3 million-acre forest that cars and trucks, ATVs,

motorcycles and dirt bikes can travel. Snowmobiles are not part of the plan.

The document proposes changes across the forest, including:

- <> Closing the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest to cross-country travel by motorized vehicles.
- <> Designating 1,640 miles of corridors to allow motorized access to 81 percent of the forest's existing dispersed camping.
- <> Closing 2,587 miles of Maintenance Level 1 roads to all motorized use, unless it's part of an official motorized trail. Most of these roads are currently closed to cars and trucks by an earth berm.
- <> Opening 350 miles of roads to WATVs, which are equipped with street-legal safety features such as headlights and turn signals.

Jennifer Zbyszewski, a recreation manager for the U.S. Forest Service, said the agency started working on a Travel Management Plan about 10 years ago, when the agency came out with a new rule requiring all national forests to designate specific areas for motorized use, rather than allowing it across the forest.

The rule was necessary because of growing recreational uses, and changes in the kinds of motorized recreation. Districts were noticing more user-built trails, and some were damaging resources.

But with 2.6 million acres of the 4.3-million-acre forest open to motorized recreation — including almost 8,000 miles of roads and 1,000 miles of motorized trails — the task of designating and analyzing the environmental impacts to allowing motorized use in specific areas became too complicated, Zbyszewski said.

"It got so complicated, we started losing that site specificity," which is required to do a proper environmental analysis, she said.

So in 2013, the agency paused the EIS process and the following year decided to look at what parts of the Travel Management Rule could be consistently applied across the entire 4.2-million acre forest.

The agency decided to, temporarily, keep existing motorized uses as they are on roads and trails, except for the Maintenance Level 1 roads. It also decided to stop allowing motorized vehicles to travel cross-country.

Under all three action alternatives, 5,366 miles of roads would remain open to motorized uses, while 2,587 miles of Maintenance Level 1 roads would be closed to all motorized uses.

There is also a No Action alternative, in which no changes would be made.

Zbyszewski said the other component in the environmental analysis is allowing motor vehicles to drive to most dispersed campsites, which are not official campsites, but areas where people have camped for years, often beside a river or lake.

"People like to drive to these established campsites," she said. So after a thorough inventory of the forest's dispersed campsites, the agency included the user-established routes that are at least 100 feet from water, and farther than 300 feet from an existing road to allow under its preferred alternative.

One of the alternatives allows no motorized use in areas where there's critical fish habitat, and the other allows motorized use in all of the user-established roads to campsites.

The Forest Service will accept comments on the draft analysis until July 1.

"Once we get through this, we'll start looking at the trail system itself, and look at making changes to the motorized system at a scale that's small enough so we can track the impacts," Zbyszewski said. "Those will be separate actions, and that's in the future."

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