

ORVs on the Coconino National Forest: A Citizen's Guide to Key Issues

What is at Stake for Me?

The Coconino has released a draft plan that could guide the management of off-road vehicles (ORVs) on the forest for years to come. Their proposed action leaves a number of unnecessary roads that directly impact significant wildlife habitat and sensitive watersheds. It does not go far enough to restore the values most visitors seek when they come to the forest.

We are optimistic that we can influence this plan so that it protects and reclaims special places for the benefit of wildlife and the majority of the public. But, we need your help! This guide is intended to help you effectively comment on the draft plan so that your voice is heard.

What Should I Ask For and Why?

Here are some suggestions for key issues to bring up during meetings, phone calls or in letters to the Forest Service.

Too Many Unnecessary "Roads to Nowhere"

Ask for: an average forest-wide road density of no more than one mile per square mile, a standard supported by a large and influential number of scientists (Concerned Scientists 2004).

Why?

- The PA does not meet the Travel Management Planning Rule requirement to provide only the minimum transportation system needed
- The PA leaves open nearly 4,000 miles of routes that, if linked together, would cross the nation one and a third times. Many of these roads will continue to adversely impact wildlife, soils, and vegetation, as well as quiet users without providing any significant access values.

Negative Wildlife Impacts

Ask for closure to public motorized travel of:

- any road that intersects or lies within close proximity to a Mexican spotted owl Protected Activity Center (PAC) or a Northern goshawk Post-Fledging Family Area (PFA) or nest.
- roads for core and other significant habitat for pronghorn antelope, Gunnison's prairie dog, mountain lion and black bear.

Why?

- The proposal keeps open a substantial number of unnecessary roads that directly impact this important wildlife habitat.
- Sensitive headwater regions, including East and West Clear creeks, will continue to degrade due to motorized impacts.

Degraded Visitor Experience

Ask for: the agency to reduce unnecessary and destructive routes to improve quiet experiential opportunities consistent with the preferences of the majority of Forest visitors.

Why?

- The proposal does not go far enough in restoring the values most visitors seek when they come to the forest.
- According to a recent Forest Service Survey, Only a small minority, about 11%, actually participate in off-road activities (ATV or all-terrain vehicles, dirt bikes, etc). The majority of visitors to the Coconino National Forest prefer quiet recreational activities

Burdensome Economic Costs

Ask for: the Forest Service to protect natural and cultural values by authorizing a road system that it can afford to maintain and enforce

Why?

- The Forest Service can only afford to maintain 420 miles of roads annually, about 10% of the proposed 3,950 open road system.
- ORV users like routes that are "challenging" and eroding, however, unmaintained roads result in accelerated soil erosion, vegetation damage and watershed degradation.

Further Route Proliferation

Support: the Forest Service for taking a first step toward decreasing this.

Ask for: the Forest Service to further reduce the route density to a maximum of one mile per square mile.

Why?

- Road density, the miles of roads per square mile of land, is an important indicator of wildlife habitat quality. The scientific community, including nationally and internationally recognized wildlife experts, recommends a maximum of 1 mile per square mile to conserve wildlife habitat.
- To its credit, the agency's proposal is an important first step that reduces road density benefiting many species, including humans who enjoy a quiet refuge as well. However, the Coconino proposal allows nearly double that standard (1.6 miles per square mile) for the biologically significant ponderosa/mixed conifer areas.

Prohibition of Cross Country Travel for Game Retrieval

Support: the agency's recommendation to allow for motorized game retrieval only on designated, open roads.

Why?

- The proposal prohibits motorized travel off designated routes for the purpose of big game retrieval. This action is consistent with the policy of all National Forests outside Arizona.
- Big game hunting occurs primarily between the months of September and December, the time the region typically receives precipitation, thus the potential for damage to soils and vegetation, and unnecessary harassment of wildlife and other visitors is significant if cross-country travel is allowed.

-Motorized access is not really an issue: even with our ideal route density of 1 mile per square mile, most of the forest would lie within one-half mile of a road.

Reasonable Access for Dispersed Camping

Support this aspect of the proposal and ask the agency to:

- Continue inventory and monitoring of existing dispersed camping sites
- Develop recreational site limits consistent with protecting natural and cultural values.
- Restore to a natural condition any site that adversely impacts sensitive natural values, such as significant wildlife habitats including riparian areas; or cultural sites such as historic structures or prehistoric ruins.
- Identify existing dispersed camping areas (consistent with the constraints identified above) on the Motor Vehicle Use Maps (MUVM).

Why?

The proposal includes a reasonable approach to provide for Forest camps near existing, authorized roads. These sites should generally be within 100 feet off designated routes.