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Coconino Travel Management Plan: Threat Remains to Crucial Wildlife Habitat and Quiet Recreation

FLAGSTAFF, *Ariz.*— On Tuesday, July 17, the Coconino National Forest released a “Proposed Action” outlining its plan for reining in off-road vehicle abuse in the forest — a plan required under the Forest Service’s national Travel Management Rule of 2005. Although the plan finally prohibits cross-country motor vehicle travel, it fails to significantly reduce designated roads in crucial wildlife habitat and watersheds and rewards the irresponsible behavior of off-road vehicle drivers by legitimizing 40 miles of illegally created, renegade routes as part of the forest’s system of motorized roads. The proposal will keep 79 percent of the Coconino within a half-mile of a designated open road; all-terrain vehicle and dirt-bike travel will be permitted on approximately 75 percent of existing roads.

“The Coconino is an incredibly rich, diverse forest that serves as a refuge for imperiled and biologically important species like the Mexican spotted owl, Northern goshawk, pronghorn antelope, mule deer, Gunnison’s prairie dog, mountain lion and black bear,” explained Chris Kassar, a wildlife biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “If we want our great-grandchildren to know this wildlife, we need the Forest Service to create and implement a more protective solution that will actually decrease roads and begin to reverse the degradation caused by motorized vehicle abuse.”

“For years, we’ve been working to address the negative impacts of an expanding spider web of more than 5,000 miles of roads on the Coconino. Current and even proposed road densities are significantly beyond the level that scientists recommend to adequately support wildlife. We’re glad to see the Forest Service moving forward to reduce route density and eliminate ORVs ripping through the forest at will,” said Kim Crumbo, conservation director of the Grand Canyon Wildlands Council. “That *is* a step in the right direction. However, the Coconino is still allowing motorized routes through critical wildlife habitat and on erodible slopes, particularly in the East Clear Creek watershed — the most biologically significant area of the forest. We find that unacceptable. “

Irresponsible off-road use in northern Arizona was specifically cited by the U.S. Forest Service in the draft Travel Management Rule as among the worst in the nation for the

documented spread of noxious weeds, erosion, disturbance to wildlife, degradation to sight and sound, as well as a source of conflict with other recreationists.

“By the Forest Service’s own numbers, all-terrain vehicle users and other motorized recreationists are a minority of forest visitors, yet the agency continues to ignore its own data to justify a false need for more access,” said Kassar. In a recent agency study, only 11 percent of visitors the agency surveyed participated in off-road activities, and less than three percent of visitors responded that motorized recreation, including driving for pleasure, was their primary reason for visiting a national forest. Hiking, viewing wildlife and natural features, and relaxing and escaping noise are far more important to visitors. But the impact of off-road type vehicles is so pervasive that other forest visitors are frustrated by the decreasing quality of their experience.

“This is a simple numbers game. The Coconino can only maintain 11 percent of its roads under current budget conditions, so why is it proposing to keep 75 percent open?” said Liz Boussard with the Grand Canyon Wildlands Council. “Although ATV enthusiasts may enjoy the challenge of steep, rutted and muddy routes, there is no way the Forest Service can annually repair roadbed conditions to meet safety standards or control eroding soils that choke our vital watersheds and fisheries.”

“The Forest Service has a responsibility to protect these lands — the wildlife habitat as well as the opportunity for quiet recreation — for this and future generations,” said Sandy Bahr, conservation outreach director for the Sierra Club’s Grand Canyon Chapter. “We are asking that irresponsible, illegally created routes be closed and that any routes that threaten wildlife habitat or erode sensitive soils also be closed. This will still leave plenty of access to our national forest, while also providing opportunities for some natural quiet.”

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For more information about the Coconino and to view photos go to:

www.endangeredeearth.org/orv

The Center for Biological Diversity is a nonprofit conservation organization with more than 35,000 members dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

The Grand Canyon Wildlands Council is a nonprofit organization devoted to the protection and restoration of all native species in natural patterns of abundance and distribution throughout northern Arizona, southern Utah, and west-central New Mexico.

The Sierra Club is America's oldest, largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization. Inspired by nature, the Sierra Club's nearly 800,000 members — including 14,000 in Arizona — work together to protect our communities and the planet. Sierra Club members and staff use and work for protection of the lands within the Coconino National Forest.