

**Statement of Mary Margaret Sloan, President, American Hiking Society
On the Forest Service Motorized Recreation Draft Rules
September 1, 2004**

According to a 2003 survey, there are 72 million hikers in the United States. Of those, 61.5 million are participants, meaning they hike at least once a year, and 10.5 million are activists, meaning they hike at least once a month. Americans hike for an array of reasons—it is a fun way to enjoy time with our families; it is a great way to get and stay healthy by losing weight and controlling high blood pressure; and it is a wonderful way to escape the hurry of our daily lives and see wildlife to boot.

I count myself as an activist hiker. I hike about once a week—in national forests if I have a full day, or community parks if I do not. However, there are places I will avoid. I will not hike where I know there will be or could be off-road vehicles. And, American Hiking Society's membership is telling me the same.

This spring, we began a survey of our 150 member organizations, with a combined membership of over a half a million people. What we are learning is that off-road vehicle use is displacing hikers in all regions of the country. Hiking clubs have reported numerous examples of severe ORV damage on hiking trails, ranging from California to Minnesota to Florida to Montana. Additionally, volunteers on hiking trails, who commit hundreds of thousands of hours of volunteer labor on public lands each year, are having to spend more and more time repairing the damage to hiking trails wrecked by off-road vehicles.

Here are just two examples of the challenges hikers have when faced with unchecked ORV use. In Washington, the Washington Trails Association recruits volunteers to build and maintain hiking trails throughout the Cascade and Olympic ranges. In member surveys, that group has found that over 90% of its members will not hike on a trail where there is motorized use. Additionally, because motorized trails are expensive to maintain and enforce, the precedent in Washington has been that hikers and other tax-payers shoulder some of the expense. And, in Texas, the Sam Houston National Forest has 150 miles of trails which are designated for hiking only and maintained by volunteers. However, persistent unlawful ORV use results in deep rutting of the trail in the Caney Creek bottoms, which causes the trail to degrade into a mud bog and becomes difficult and even unsafe to hike because the trail disappears entirely under a maze of tire tracks. The hiking volunteers who maintain those trails are becoming disgruntled and disinclined to continue their trail maintenance only to see it ruined.

The widespread impacts of unchecked motorized recreation on the land, environment, and wildlife, including resource damage, air and water pollution, and noise, adversely affect the experiences of hikers and other recreationists. Incursions on non-motorized and hiking-only trails lead to user conflicts and safety and health threats and disrupt the solitude and wild character of the backcountry that hikers seek when they go to forests. As off-road vehicle use has exploded

and vehicles become capable of traversing almost any terrain, the Forest Service has failed to effectively manage this use or consistently enforce even its most basic rules on off-road use.

This July, the Forest Service issued new draft rules for the use of dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles, and other off-road vehicles in America's national forests—an effort critical to the protection of natural resources and recreational experiences for hikers across the country. Although these changes are a step in the right direction and we appreciate the urgency with which FS Chief Bosworth is addressing this issue, these steps will not resolve the problems. It is critical that the Forest Service include additional measures in the final rule to protect public lands, wildlife, and other types of recreation. This includes issuing directives and creating incentives for land managers to designate motorized routes in a timely, ecological, and socially responsible manner. Decisions about which routes are appropriate for off-road vehicles must be based on sound science, site-specific analysis and balanced public participation. The agency must also establish a clear, short-term, and enforceable time frame, ideally within two years, in which roads and routes must be designated for off-road vehicle use. Failure to do so will only perpetuate the problem and displace more hikers and vital trail volunteers from FS trails. The opportunity to comment on the draft rules closes September 13th.

American Hiking Society urges the Forest Service to step up for hikers and other nonmotorized enjoyers of our national forests. Unmanaged off-road vehicle use is destroying the recreational experience of hikers and degrading the natural values that we treasure.