

**Statement of Scott Kovarovics, Director, Natural Trails and Waters Coalition  
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*“An estimated 5 million off-road recreational vehicles – motorcycles, minibikes, trail bikes, snowmobiles, dune-buggies, all-terrain vehicles, and others – are in use in the United States today, and their popularity continues to increase rapidly. The widespread use of such vehicles on public lands – often for legitimate purposes but also in frequent conflict with wise land and resource management practices, environmental values and other types of recreational activity – has demonstrated the need for a unified Federal policy toward the use of such vehicles on the public lands.”*

President Richard Nixon made this observation a generation ago when he directed federal land managers in an Executive Order to develop policies to “ensure that use of off-road vehicles on public lands will be controlled and directed” to protect soil, water, wildlife, and the safety and experiences of other users. President Nixon wanted to stay ahead of the gathering wave.

Fast forward 30 years to Earth Day 2003. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth acknowledged that the agency got swamped when he identified unmanaged recreation, particularly off-road vehicle use, as one of the greatest threats to America’s National Forests. He catalogued the impacts: “We’re seeing more and more erosion, water degradation and habitat destruction. We’re seeing more and more conflicts between users. . . And those are just some of the impacts.”

And he highlighted how the public’s forests are hemorrhaging from the spread of unplanned – or renegade – routes, saying: “Each year, we get hundreds of miles of what we euphemistically refer to as ‘unplanned road and trails.’ For example, the Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana has more than a thousand unplanned roads and trails reaching for almost 650 miles. That’s pretty typical for a lot of national forests, and it’s only going to get worse.”

In many National Forests today, off-road vehicle use is not simply unmanaged, it is out of control. All-terrain vehicles (ATVs), dirt bikes and other vehicles are almost everywhere and any semblance of balance between this use and resource protection and other uses is hard to find.

When this issue is discussed, we often hear a lot about access. What we rarely hear about is excess. Based on Forest Service data, nearly 274,000 miles of roads and routes are available to off-road vehicles today. That is about 6 times longer than the Interstate Highway System. In some forests, ATVs and dirt bikes can travel cross-country over hundreds of thousands, even millions, of acres. Using Forest Service figures, approximately 69 million acres – more than one-third of the land base of all National Forests – is open in some form to cross-country travel.

With off-road vehicles almost everywhere, there are fewer and fewer places where families can go for a quiet walk in the woods or a picnic. Our National Forests are, and should remain, open  
-over please-

for many uses. The problem is uncontrolled off-road vehicle use dominates the landscape at the expense of almost any other activity and the benefits forests provide, like clean water and wildlife habitat. While the Forest Service estimates that 5 percent of people who visited National Forests in 2002 went primarily to use off-road vehicles, the other 95 percent participated in a wide range of other activities, including hiking and walking, hunting, fishing, viewing nature, and cross-country skiing.

In July, the Forest Service proposed new rules that it maintains will improve off-road vehicle management and address the growing threat. Although current rules are not the source of the problem and new rules alone will not solve it, the proposal includes some reforms that could better protect America's National Forests if effectively implemented on the ground. Important reforms include:

- Prohibiting cross-country motorized recreation across entire forests.
- Limiting ATVs, dirt bikes and Jeeps to roads and routes designated on official Forest Service maps as open for their use.
- Concluding that forests do not need to inventory and map every unauthorized, renegade ATV or dirt bike route before commencing the route designation process.

While the draft rules represent a step forward, they must be significantly strengthened to respond to the enormity of the threat. Among other things, any final rules must:

- **Include a 2-year timeframe by which the Forest Service must study and designate routes.** The proposal is partially modeled on a plan approved in January 2001 by Chief Bosworth when he was Regional Forester for Montana and the Dakotas. That plan did not include a timeframe for getting work done. Nearly 4 years later, not a single forest in that region has completed route designations.
- **Immediately prohibit use of unauthorized, renegade routes until a system of roads and routes is legally designated.** The Forest Service needs to use a tourniquet to stem proliferation of renegade routes across the land. The proposal doesn't even apply a band-aid. Failure to immediately prevent such use will cause more damage and displacement and effectively reward unauthorized and, in some cases, illegal actions.
- **Ensure that all road and routes, including renegade routes, are analyzed in public process to assess current and potential impacts to the land, water quality, wildlife, and other forest users before designation.**
- **Finally, the agency must demonstrate a commitment to allocating the resources necessary to get this job done and then to enforce the rules on the ground.** Otherwise, these rules will be worth little more than the paper on which they are printed.

By adopting these common sense recommendations, the Forest Service has an opportunity to begin to achieve the goals set out by President Nixon. America's National Forests can not wait another 30 years if it does not.