

NATIONAL FORESTS

From the gently rolling hills of New England to the peaks of the Sierra Nevada in California, from southern Appalachia to Alaska, National Forests are part of America's backyard, playground and cherished natural legacy. These forests cover 192 million acres in 42 states and provide priceless benefits, including clean air and drinking water, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities for millions of visitors every year.

Today, our National Forests and the values they represent are threatened by growing and uncontrolled use of dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), snowmobiles and other off-road vehicles. These vehicles are clogging streams with sediment, damaging wetlands that filter drinking water, splintering wildlife and big game habitat, and driving other users, including hikers, cross-country skiers, hunters and anglers, away from their National Forests.

Off-Road Vehicles Can Go Almost Everywhere:

Dirt bikes, ATVs, snowmobiles and other off-road vehicles can travel almost anywhere in America's National Forests.

- In 2001, the U.S. Forest Service reported that National Forests contained more than 460,000 miles of roads. Data from 2004 indicates that more than 273,000 miles of forest roads and other routes are open to off-road vehicles.
- More than 90 percent of the 177 National Forests and Grasslands have roads, routes and/or areas open to off-road vehicles.
- On some National Forests, ATVs and dirt bikes can travel almost without limit over hundreds of thousands, even millions, of acres.

Forest Service Acknowledges Growing Problem:

In an Earth Day 2003 speech, Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth highlighted four "great issues" facing National Forests, including unmanaged off-road vehicle use. The Chief described the explosion in unauthorized, renegade routes. "Each year, we get hundreds of miles of what we euphemistically refer to as 'unplanned roads 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 its only going to get worse."

(Managing the National Forest System: Great Issues and Great Diversion, April 22, 2003)

This example fails to capture the scope of this part of the larger problem. In 2001, the Forest Service estimated that National Forests were crisscrossed with 60,000 miles of user-created "ghost roads," many of which were blazed by off-road vehicles.

The Chief went on to describe a litany of other adverse impacts caused by uncontrolled off-road vehicle use, including soil erosion, habitat destruction, damage to cultural and sacred sites, and conflicts with millions of other visitors.

Moreover, the threat posed by off-road vehicles is even more significant when one considers the role they play in spreading noxious and invasive weeds and fragmenting critical wildlife habitat, two of the other "great issues" the Chief described.

Forest Service has Clear Legal Authority to Control Off-Road Vehicle Use:

The Forest Service has clear authority and responsibility to control off-road vehicle use on public lands. Key sources of that legal authority include:

- Executive Order 11644, issued by President Nixon in 1972, states that "the use of off-road vehicles on public lands will be controlled and directed so as to protect the resources of those lands, to promote the safety of all users of those lands, and to

minimize conflicts among various uses of those lands.”

- Executive Order 11989, issued by President Carter in 1977, directs federal land managers to close land to off-road vehicles where their use "will cause or is causing considerable adverse effects on soil, vegetation, wildlife, wildlife habitat or cultural or historic resources until such time as [the manager] determines that such adverse effects have been eliminated and that measures have been implemented to prevent future recurrence.”
- General Forest Service regulations prohibit a number of activities on and off Forest Service roads and routes. For example, forest uses, including off-road vehicle use, which damage any natural feature, harm any imperiled, sensitive, or unique plant, or which disturb, injure, or destroy any prehistoric, historic or archeological resource, are prohibited.

Damaging the Land:

All-terrain vehicles, dirt bikes and other off-road vehicles cause soil erosion, strip plants from the ground and spread invasive weeds and disease.

- In one small portion of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska, America’s only temperate rainforest, illegal all-terrain vehicle routes have damaged as many as 23,000 acres of critical wetlands. (Bane, 2001)
- Officials in the Wayne National Forest in Ohio describe illegal off-road vehicle use as “an important cause of non-point source erosion into streams and ponds.... The ORV trail system is probably the largest contributor to off-site erosion on the Forest.”
- In the Sequoia National Forest in California, off-road vehicles have widened some routes in excess of 30 feet to avoid speed bumps, while others have carved ruts three feet deep.

Illegal Use Costs Taxpayers Millions:

Illegal off-road vehicle use does more than damage the land and harm wildlife, it costs the American taxpayers millions of dollars annually for emergency repairs, to mitigate future damage and rehabilitate critical resources.

- The Forest Service estimates that ATVs and dirt bikes have carved 550 miles of illegal, cross-country routes across the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia. The Service has calculated that it will cost American taxpayers nearly \$1 million to repair the damage caused by this illegal network.
- On one ranger district of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest in Colorado, soil erosion, rutting and other damage caused by illegal off-road vehicle use will cost more than \$500,000 to repair.

Harming Wildlife:

Off-road vehicles have a wide range of negative impacts on wildlife and wildlife habitat.

- In the El Dorado National Forest in California, the Forest Service opened three-quarters of critical winter range for deer to dirt bikes and ATVs to accommodate a 100-mile race through the Forest. The senior biologist for the El Dorado described this action as “ill-advised” and dismissed a plan to monitor the impacts of off-road vehicles on deer as “useless.” (California Wilderness Coalition, 2001)
- The Forest Service was forced to close a section of Alaska’s Tongass National Forest because illegal ATV use was damaging critical wildlife habitat. The Service concluded that “[A]s a result of this illegal use, habitat [for fish and shorebirds] has been degraded ...”
- The Colville (WA) and Idaho Panhandle (ID) National Forests contain a recovery zone for the endangered woodland caribou. After the herd was twice displaced by snowmobiles, the Service closed this area to these machines.