
IMPACTS ON PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

The threats posed by off-road vehicles extend well beyond soil erosion and wildlife harassment. The use of dirt bikes, snowmobiles, jet skis and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) jeopardizes the safety and health of millions of Americans who visit public lands and waters each year, as well as dedicated employees who work there. Land managers have an undeniable obligation to protect every visitor and public employee from the growing safety risks associated with unmanaged off-road vehicle use.

Off-Road Vehicles are Faster, More Powerful than Ever Before:

Over the past decade, every category of mass-produced off-road vehicle has become more powerful, faster and capable of reaching further into the backcountry.

- Jet skis with larger engines can travel 60 miles per hour, about 88 feet per second, in their stock configuration. (National Transportation Safety Board, 1998)
- In 2003, Bombardier introduced a 185 horsepower, supercharged jet ski (GTX+ 4-TEC) that it describes as the “industry’s first and only supercharged watercraft.” Promotional material states: “With 185 horsepower and zero lag (unlike a turbocharger, our superchargers is always on), it’s the most powerful, highest performance production watercraft you can buy.” *Watercraft World* magazine topped 62 miles per hour on this jet ski. (“Modern Muscle,” March 2003)
- Honda entered the jet ski market for the first time in 2002 with two models. The base model had 125 horsepower while the other, equipped with a turbo charger, generated 165 horsepower. A new Yamaha jet ski introduced in 2001 had 140 horsepower.
- By way of comparison, the average model year 2003 Honda Accord generates 160 horsepower while the 2003 Ford Taurus produces 155.
- Snowmobiles have been clocked racing through Yellowstone National Park at speeds in excess of 85 miles per hour, nearly twice the legal speed limit.

- According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the number of ATVs with the biggest engines (400 cc or greater) increased by more than 200 percent between 1997 and 2001. (All-Terrain Vehicle 2001 Injury and Exposure Studies, 2003)
- In tests reported in *Dirt Wheels* magazine, stock Honda and Yamaha ATVs reached top speeds of 78 to 80 miles per hour. When these same ATVs were modified with special gears and tires, they were clocked at speeds between 82 and 88 miles per hour. (“How Fast Will Your Quad Go?” February 2005)

Public Safety at Risk:

Today, dirt bikes, snowmobiles, jet skis and other off-road vehicles rank among the most serious human-made threats to safety and health on public lands and waters.

- A January 2002 *New York Times* story on off-road vehicle use in the BLM-managed Imperial Sand Dunes in southern California was entitled, “A Holiday of Mayhem in ‘The Most Illegal Place in the World.’” After the article describes a scene in which a pickup bursts into flames to the cheers of a “mob,” a ranger is quoted as saying, “It’s a real mess down there... We don’t want to send any [law enforcement] officers down there because we can’t be sure they’d be safe.”
 - According to the National Marine Manufacturers Association, jet skis account for approximately nine percent of all registered boats in the U.S. However, based on data compiled by the U.S. Coast Guard for 2000, jet skis are disproportionately involved in more than 30 percent of all boating accidents and nearly 40 percent of all boating injuries.
-

- Most jet skis lose all steering capability when the rider releases the throttle in a natural reaction to danger. This loss of control is completely at odds with how cars operate when the operator releases the gas pedal.
- Jet skis pose a serious threat to swimmers and other beach goers because they require hundreds of feet to stop. According to Yamaha, the stopping distance of its machines ranges from 260 to 470 feet while Kawasaki warns owners of the Ultra-150 to “[L]eave 348 feet to come to a stop.” (Sacramento Bee, August 9, 2001)
- ATVs pose a growing safety risk to riders and the public at large. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates that between 1993 and 2003 the number of emergency room-treated injuries caused by ATVs more than doubled – from 49,800 to 125,500. This increase occurred during a period in which the industry increasingly touted its education and safety campaigns. (2003 Annual Report of ATV Deaths and Injuries, 2005)
- CPSC data also tell a chilling story about children killed in ATV accidents. Between 1982 and 2003, 1,846 children under age 16, or 32 percent of the total number of fatalities, were killed by ATVs. During this same period, 778 victims were children under 12. (2003 Annual Report of ATV Deaths and Injuries, 2005)
- The serious safety issues associated with ATVs prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to issue a set of policy recommendations in 2000 that call on states to prohibit children younger than 16 from operating these machines. Manufacturers make ATVs for children as young as six. The AAP has issued similar policy recommendations for jet skis and snowmobiles. (American Academy of Pediatrics, Policy Statement, June 2000)
- America’s pediatricians have highlighted the need to protect children too young to drive a car from the dangers posed by ATVs stating, “[T]he safe use of ATVs (referring to 2- and 4-wheel vehicles) requires the same or greater skill, judgement, and experience as needed to operate an automobile.” (American Academy of Pediatrics, Policy Statement, June 2000)

Pollution Threatens Public Health:

While pollution in cities across the country is widely recognized as a major threat to public health, this issue receives less attention on public lands. However, visitors and employees face numerous risks and can be exposed to harmful pollutants at levels that rival urban areas. The most comprehensive analysis of this issue on public lands has occurred at Yellowstone National Park.

- During the winter of 2001-02, rangers at Yellowstone wore respirators at the west entrance gate to reduce their exposure to toxic exhaust generated by the thousands of snowmobiles entering the park on busy weekends. During the prior winter season, over a dozen rangers filed medical reports complaining of symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning, including sore throats, headaches, lethargy, eye irritation and tightness in the lungs.
- During the winter of 2002-03, some rangers at Yellowstone’s west entrance were outfitted with special hearing protection in order to reduce the risk of high-end hearing loss caused by snowmobiles.
- Growing concern about the adverse effects of exposure to tiny particles in snowmobile exhaust prompted the Park Service to issue paper dust masks to all employees that rode on or worked in close proximity to snowmobiles during winter 2002-03.
- National health organizations, including the American Cancer Society and Physicians for Social Responsibility, wrote to Yellowstone’s Superintendent in 2003 urging that every visitor to the Park be warned of the dangers associated with particulate pollution and offered similar paper masks. The Park failed to take such action.
- As part of its decision to continue large-scale snowmobile use in Yellowstone, the Park Service acknowledges that: “Where high levels of [air] pollutants and other air toxics occur, visitors who are susceptible to respiratory problems would likely be adversely and minor to moderately affected.” (Winter Use Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, p. 191)