



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Mark Twain National Forest

401 Fairgrounds Road
Rolla, Missouri 65401
(573) 364-4621 TTY (573) 341-7453
FAX (573) 364-6844

File Code: 1950

Date: December 22, 2003

Dear Neighbor:

This scoping letter is being sent to solicit comments on a proposal to conduct a study that would help managers on the Mark Twain National Forest determine the environmental and social impacts of off-highway vehicle (OHV) trails. An off-highway vehicle (OHV) is defined as a vehicle used off a road on a trail or area. OHV's include four-wheel drive vehicles, off road motorcycles and all terrain vehicles (ATV). All terrain vehicles (ATV) are motorized vehicles manufactured for off-highway use, traveling on three, four, or more low pressure tires, with a seat designed to be straddled by the operator and handlebars for steering control.

PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is to conduct a three-year study to evaluate three motorized trail systems. This study would help the Forest Service determine the environmental and social impacts of OHV trails on the National Forest. Existing conditions would be evaluated prior to opening the trail systems, and resource conditions would be monitored throughout the duration of the study. Management would respond to trail conditions and potential resource concerns by using different techniques, such as seasonal closures and weather related closures, which would be part of the study. Preliminary monitoring of the project area would be used as a baseline to determine environmental effects occurring during the study period. Prior to initiating the study, preliminary levels of acceptable change would be established. If changes to the environment occur that are beyond the levels of acceptable change, the study would be modified or OHV use terminated during the 3-year study period.

Part of this proposed action includes the Mark Twain National Forest's participation in a national study conducted by the San Dimas Technology and Development Center. The objective of the study is to determine, through a set of scientific experiments, if ATV mechanical components or equipment (e.g., tires) cause harm to the natural environment. The experiments would be conducted on existing trails and undisturbed areas. The information derived from these experiments is intended to provide managers with a scientific basis from which to make decisions about the management of ATV's on the National Forests. The study would also examine alternative trail design and hardening techniques to minimize ATV impacts.

Roads and trails would be designated open by the use of trail markers. Most of the designated trail system would consist of current system, non-system, and county roads, and trails that have been previously used and are in locations suitable for the proposed study use. Many of these trails and roads have been used for a number of years. A small number of connector trails would be constructed to connect existing trail sections. Several existing non-system road segments and



trails would be closed to motorized use as part of this proposal for soil and water protection, protection of heritage resource sites, stream crossings, sensitive habitats, and locations in proximity to private property. Madison County Road #319 and Wayne County Road #432, proposed for use as part of the trail system, would return to Forest Service jurisdiction. The county roads in Washington County would remain under county jurisdiction.

The proposed trail study would be under the fee demonstration authority. The fees collected would be used to increase Forest Service presence in the study areas, to provide visitor information at trailheads, and to accomplish trail maintenance.

LOCATION

The general locations of the three study areas are as follows:

Palmer Study Area - This study area would be located on the Potosi Unit of the Potosi/Fredericktown Ranger District in Washington County, approximately 12 miles southwest of Potosi, Missouri. The legal description is T36N, R1W, Sections 1, 2, 10-15, 22-26, 35, and 36; T36N, R1E, Sections 1-4, 6-24, 27, and 30; T37N, R1E, Sections 31-35. This trail system would be managed for a variety of motorized vehicles, including jeeps and dune buggies. There would also be 3 small designated areas for off-road and off-trail riding, totaling approximately 31 acres in the Palmer Study Area. Trailheads and parking areas would also be constructed at some locations.

Cherokee Pass Study Area - This study area would be located on the Fredericktown Unit of the Potosi/Fredericktown Ranger District in Madison County, approximately seven miles south of Fredericktown, Missouri. The legal description is T32N, R6E, Sections 1, 11-14, 22-26, 35, and 36; T32N, R7E, Sections 3-11, 15-23, 26-34. This trail system would be managed for ATV and equestrian use. Other motorized four-wheel drive vehicles, such as jeeps, motorcycles, and dune buggies, would not be allowed. Trailheads and parking areas would also be constructed at some locations.

Blackwell Ridge Study Area – This study area would be located on the Poplar Bluff Ranger District in Wayne County, approximately 1½ mile north of Williamsville, Missouri. The legal description is T27N, R4E, Sections 1-4, and 12; T27N, R5E, Sections 5, 6, and 8; T28N, R4E Sections 32-34. This trail system would be managed for ATV's only. Other motorized four-wheel drive vehicles, such as motorcycles, four-wheel drive jeeps, and dune buggies, would not be allowed. Trailheads and parking areas would also be constructed at some locations.

The following table lists the approximate miles of trails and roads that would either be open or closed to OHV/ATV use during the study period. It also indicates the number of existing, permanently-flowing stream crossings that would remain open and the number of existing, permanently-flowing stream crossings that would be closed to motorized use. This is indicated by jurisdiction, i.e. county, system, and non-system historic use roads. The enclosed maps also provide more information regarding each area, including the locations of proposed trailheads.

	Miles of NFSR*/County Road used for Study	Miles of Non-system roads** used for Study	Miles of New Trail Construction for Study	Existing Miles of Non-system roads** or trails to be closed	Number of Existing Permanently-Flowing Stream Crossings remaining open	Number of Existing Permanently-Flowing Stream Crossings to be closed
Palmer Study Area	33	35	1	51	2 – County 2 – System 1 – Historic use Non-System	23 – Historic use Non-System
Cherokee Pass Study Area	17	27	1	9	0 – County 3 – System 3 – Historic use Non-System	2 – Historic use Non-System
Blackwell Ridge Study Area	21	7	3	7	1 - County	0

*National Forest System Road (NFSR): A road under the jurisdiction of the Forest Service and determined to be needed for long term motor vehicle access.

**Non-system Road: These typically are historic roads that were constructed or developed through use before the land was incorporated into the National Forest system. These roads are not managed as part of the Forest transportation system and include unplanned roads, abandoned travel ways and off-road vehicle tracks that have not been designated and managed as a trail, and those roads that were once under permit or authorization and were not decommissioned upon the termination of the authorization.

BACKGROUND

The Chief of the Forest Service has identified unmanaged recreation, especially unmanaged OHV use, as one of the four major threats to National Forest lands. Unmanaged OHV use is creating a number of undesirable impacts on National Forest System lands. Land managers are concerned that unmanaged OHV use is contributing to an increase in user-created unplanned roads and trails, eroded soils, damaged wetlands and harm to wetland species, habitat destruction, impaired water quality, spread of invasive species, and destruction of heritage sites.

In 1972, Presidential Executive Order # 11644 was issued which recognized motorized recreation as a legitimate use of public land. The use of OHV's is a popular recreational activity on the Mark Twain National Forest. Currently, the Forest Plan and Missouri state law guide Forest policy for OHV use. OHV's are allowed on numbered National Forest System roads, in accordance with state law. The state law provides that motorized vehicles must either be "street legal" or that counties adopt a permit system to allow ATV use on county roads. In addition, the Forest currently has two designated motorized trail systems for ATV's and motorcycles: Chadwick Motorcycle and ATV Use Area, near Springfield, Missouri, with nearly 125 miles of motorized trail, and Sutton Bluff Motorcycle and ATV Use Area, near Centerville, Missouri, with about 26 miles of motorized trail.

However, the existing situation has not kept pace with the growing demand for additional OHV use areas on the National Forest. Nationally, the number of OHV's has climbed from about 5 million in 1972 to 36 million in 2000, an increase of 600%. In 2001, Missouri was 10th in the nation in new all-terrain vehicle (ATV) sales with over 22,000 ATV's sold.

Although Forest managers are aware that OHV demands are rising dramatically, public meetings held across the Forest in April 2003 highlighted that many customers who use OHV's are not satisfied with having their riding restricted to National Forest system roads and the existing motorized trail systems. A need for additional trail systems was voiced by many of those in attendance.

Because the demand and need for OHV riding areas far exceeds the number of riding areas legally available, illegal OHV use can easily be found on most non-system roads, fire lines, and utility rights-of-way, and other non-designated areas of the forest. With 1.5 million acres of National Forest scattered across 29 counties, access available to OHV users through many entry points, and a patchwork ownership pattern, attempts to stop the illegal use of OHV's on the National Forest have generally been unsuccessful, and law enforcement is challenging and difficult. Law enforcement saturation efforts would continue to be used to stop illegal OHV use, but law enforcement cannot be the only answer to this problem.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The primary purpose of this project is to study OHV use and users to guide future management options on OHV trail opportunities and use. This study will also evaluate equipment impacts to natural resources. Social impacts, such as customer satisfaction, demographics of trail users, and compatibility between trail users, would also be studied.

The Mark Twain National Forest needs to determine if designating more motorized trails can be done in a manner that not only provides for this recreational use, but also addresses environmental concerns. It is hoped that by providing additional designated OHV trails, OHV users would avoid undesignated roads and trails and, thereby, the overall environmental damage from unauthorized use can be reduced. Observations by OHV managers locally and from other states indicate that when OHV riders have designated areas to ride, they are more likely to stay on designated routes.

Therefore, the OHV customer, the resource manager, and the environment should all benefit from this study. Resource managers would be able to direct OHV customers to a designated trail system where impacts are confined, minimized, evaluated, monitored, and mitigated. With this study, OHV customers would know they are in an area where they can legally ride in a setting they enjoy. The Forest Service can promote responsible OHV use, better communication with this forest user group, promote local partnerships for conservation education and OHV trail maintenance, and evaluate resource and social impacts.

The focus of this study is to evaluate OHV use in three separate study locations and publish an evaluation of what is learned. The results of this study would be used to guide future management decisions on OHV trail management here and elsewhere in the National Forest

System. At the end of the study period, unless the study is modified or terminated early, a separate decision, following the National Environmental Policy Act process, would be made as to whether or not to designate all, part, or none of the three areas as permanent OHV trails. The data collected from this study and other ongoing national studies would be used to corroborate and assist in making that decision.

FOREST PLAN DIRECTION

The 1986 Mark Twain National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), as amended, provides general guidance and direction for the Proposed Action. The OHV Trail Study meets the Forest Plan Direction, Recreation Management Goals (Forest Plan IV-1), and the Forest-wide Management Direction for Recreation Management of trails (Forest Plan IV-29-IV-30).

DECISION TO BE MADE

The decision to be made is whether or not to approve the OHV Trail Study to collect data and to monitor, for up to three years, the environmental and social impacts of the three designated trail systems.

HOW TO COMMENT

Please send your comments or requests for additional information to the Potosi/Fredericktown Ranger District, P.O. Box 188, Potosi, MO 63664, telephone (573) 438-5427, or the Poplar Bluff Ranger District, P.O. Box 988, 1420 Maud Street, Poplar Bluff, MO 63901, (573) 785-1475. Electronic comments must be sent via the Internet to: **comments-eastern-mark-twain-potosi@fs.fed.us** within 60 days of the signature date of this letter. In order for electronic comments to be considered, they must be sent to the aforementioned email address. To access project information electronically, go to:
<http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/marktwain/projects/project.htm>.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection upon request.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ronnie Raum
RONNIE RAUM
Forest Supervisor

Enclosures 4