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Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Travel Management on the Santa Fe National Forest

Santa Fe, New Mexico



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Cover Photo: A father and son out to enjoy a spring day with their jeep.

Note: All photos used throughout the document were taken by Santa Fe National Forest employees except where noted otherwise.

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Santa Fe, New Mexico

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Abstract: The Santa Fe National Forest proposes to make changes to the current system of roads, motorized trails, and areas. The result of these changes will be a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motorized use. Driving off roads, or “motorized cross-country travel,” will be prohibited except in designated fixed-distance corridors solely for the purpose of motorized dispersed camping or motorized big game retrieval. These changes include amending the “Santa Fe National Forest Plan” to comply with the Travel Management Rule, which implements Executive Orders 11644 and 11989. Four action alternatives propose changes to National Forest System roads, National Forest System trails, and areas of National Forest System lands in various combinations based on the public’s comments during the scoping period. The Santa Fe National Forest does not have a preferred alternative.

To Review the Large Maps of the Alternatives: The Santa Fe National Forest headquarters and five ranger district offices (Coyote, Cuba, Jemez, Pecos/Las Vegas, and Española) have large maps, 34 by 44 inches, for people to review. Printing and copy businesses can print maps from a CD.

Commenting: It is important that reviewers provide their comments at such times and in such a way that they are useful to the Agency’s preparation of the EIS. Therefore, comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period and should clearly articulate the reviewer’s concerns and contentions. The submission of timely and specific comments can affect a reviewer’s ability to participate in subsequent administrative review or judicial review. Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be part of the public record for this proposed action. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the respondent with standing to participate in subsequent administrative or judicial reviews.

Date Comments Must Be Received: To participate in administrative appeal or judicial reviews, you must submit your comments on this draft environmental impact statement during the 45-day notice and comment period, which begins the day after the notice of availability is published in

the Federal Register. We will post the due date for comments on the Web site at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/sfe/travelmgt/index.html>

Send Comments to: SFNF Travel Comments

11 Forest Lane

Santa Fe, NM 87508

Fax number: (505) 438-5391

Email address: sftravelmgt@fs.fed.us

To be considered in the project record, email must be sent to the email address listed above during the notice and comment period. People are welcome to send copies of their comments to others; however, these copies will not be tracked as part of the project record.

Summary

To comply with the Travel Management Rule, the Santa Fe National Forest (the forest) proposes to provide for a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motorized use by making changes to the current travel system. The proposed changes will reduce the places where people can drive in the Santa Fe National Forest, which is the area this proposal encompasses. The proposed changes do not restrict where people's non-motorized activities—such as hiking, camping, bicycling, hunting, and others—may take place.

Background

To address concerns about the effects of unmanaged off-highway vehicles (OHV), the Forest Service published final travel management regulations for motor vehicle use on national forests and grasslands on November 9, 2005. The Travel Management Rule “... *provides for a system of National Forest System roads, National Forest System trails, and areas on National Forest System lands that are designated for motor vehicle use. After these roads, trails, and areas are designated, motor vehicle use, including the class of vehicle and time of year, not in accordance with these designations is prohibited...*”

A motor vehicle use map (MVUM) published by the Santa Fe National Forest will show where people are allowed to drive. The motor vehicle use map enforces the system designated for motorized use. In other words, people will only be allowed to drive on the roads, trails, and areas depicted on the motor vehicle use map. If they drive places that aren't on the map, they will be subject to a fine unless they have a permit or other authorization from the Forest Service. Because the forest will publish the motor vehicle use map annually, roads, trails, and areas can be added or removed each year after the proper environmental analysis is done.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to comply with the Travel Management Rule by providing a system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motor vehicle use by class of vehicle and time of year on the Santa Fe National Forest (36 CFR 212.50).

On the Santa Fe National Forest, complying with the Travel Management Rule means there is a need for: (1) having no cross-country motorized travel except in designated areas; (2) clarification of which trails would be open for motorized use; (3) the optional designation of the limited use of motor vehicles within a specified distance of certain designated routes and, if appropriate, within specified time periods, solely for the purposes of dispersed camping or retrieval of a big game animal by an individual who has legally killed that animal; and (4) amended forest plan direction regarding motorized vehicle use that is consistent with the rule.

In addition to comply with the Travel Management Rule, there is a need to counter the detrimental effects to natural and cultural resources from the existence and use of roads and motorized trails—together called “**routes**”—and driving off routes, or motorized cross-country travel. Here are a few examples of the detrimental effects caused by motorized use and the presence of roads and motorized trails:

- The presence of roads and motorized trails interrupts the natural flow of water, channeling it and carrying sediment to streams. Sediment deposited into streams degrades water quality and habitat for fish.

Summary

- Vehicles transport nonnative invasive plant seeds to and within the forest. Roads and motorized trails act as pathways for these seeds. The establishment and spread of nonnative invasive plants disrupts native ecological processes, resulting in fewer native plants and animals.
- Roads and motorized trails fragment habitat for wildlife. Many small mammals and reptiles don't cross roads, which isolates populations and promotes inbreeding, resulting in reduced population viability. Small mammals and reptiles also risk being killed by vehicles. Large mammals avoid vehicles, roads, and motorized trails, altering where they would normally live and breed.
- Driving off roads and motorized trails can damage cultural resource sites. Wheels crush artifacts. Erosion caused by driving can wash away sites. With vehicles, people have easier access to cultural resource sites and may intentionally or unintentionally damage them.

Public Involvement

Beginning in early 2006, Santa Fe National Forest staff held a series of public meetings, workshops, and field trips that lasted through late 2007. This collaborative period generated more than 1,100 comment letters from the public. We used the information gathered at these meetings and from the letters to create the proposed action for managing motorized travel. The forest supervisor published the proposed action on July 10, 2008.

Publishing the proposed action marked the start of the scoping comment period, during which we asked the public for comments on the proposal. We mailed the proposed action to 10,270 people and held 13 public meetings. In response, we received almost 1,400 letters and emails. The content of the letters and emails formed the basis of the alternatives and environmental analysis.

Significant Issues

Significant issues form the basis of alternatives to the proposed action. We identified these five significant issues from the comment letters:

1. Continued public motorized use of routes and areas described in the proposed action will adversely affect forest resources. These effects include:
 - Erosion, soil compaction, and degradation of water quality and watershed condition;
 - Degradation of fish and wildlife habitat;
 - Damage to cultural resource sites;
 - Damage to traditional cultural properties;
 - Spread of invasive plant species;
 - Damage to rare plants; and
 - Compromise to the character of wilderness and inventoried roadless areas.
2. The reduction in miles of routes and the prohibition of cross-country travel described in the proposed action will adversely affect the quantity of public motorized experiences because the proposed action:
 - Lacks enough loops and connectors to provide for longer rides;

- Lacks diverse opportunities for all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, and 4x4s;
 - Lacks diverse routes for different skill levels;
 - Restricts access to traditional cultural properties;
 - Does not provide enough area for motorcycle trials;
 - Closes too many routes, which will concentrate use and take away the semiprimitive aspect of riding in the forest; and
 - Does not plan for the future growth in motorized sports.
3. Prohibiting motorized cross-country travel will limit the retrieval of big game, perhaps to an unacceptable level.
 4. Designating motorized dispersed camping corridors will increase cross-country travel and the resource damage associated with it and curtail the kind of unrestricted camping that the Santa Fe National Forest currently provides.
 5. The proposed action, by designating routes uniformly across the forest outside of designated wilderness, will cause conflicts between motorized and non-motorized users because they will be recreating in the same vicinity.

Using these significant issues, we created three alternatives to the proposed action. The alternatives approach the purpose and need differently. This document, then, contains five alternatives: the no action alternative required by the regulations, the proposed action, and three alternatives to the proposed action.

Alternatives

Alternative 1 is the no action alternative. It represents the existing condition, which is our best estimate of where people are driving now.

Alternative 2 is the proposed action. The proposed action described in this document differs slightly from the one mailed to the public in July 2008. It corrects the locations of roads and motorized trails based on the public's comments and our field verification. It also added the ability to retrieve big game with a vehicle in the same fixed-distance corridors proposed for motorized dispersed camping.

Alternative 3 would provide fewer roads and motorized trails than the proposed action. It allows no driving off roads and motorized trails for any reason. This means that to camp, retrieve game, or participate in any other forest activity, people would have to park next to the side of the road and proceed without their vehicles. It incorporates concerns raised in significant issues 1, 3, and 4.

Alternative 4 would provide more roads, motorized trails, and areas designated for motorized use than the proposed action, but still less than the amount people drive on now. It would allow the most places for people to drive to retrieve game or set up a campsite. It incorporates concerns raised in significant issues 2, 3, and 4.

Alternative 5 would provide about the same amount of roads, motorized trails, and areas designated for motorized use as the proposed action, but arranges motorized use geographically.

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This means that alternative 5 attempts to cluster motorized use in certain places on the forest, leaving other places with less motorized use. It incorporates concerns raised in significant issue 5.

Alternatives 2 through 5 nearly eliminate areas, which are places where people are allowed to drive off roads and trails for any purpose. With motorized trails, alternatives 2 through 5 generally increase the miles officially managed for motorized use, but decrease the mileage from what people use as motorized trails now. Alternatives 2 through 5 all increase the miles of motorized system trail—those trails officially managed by the Forest Service for motorized use. Only alternative 4 proposes to designate more miles of motorized system trail than are being used now; the rest of the action alternatives decrease the amount of mileage people use as motorized trails now.

Figure 1, figure 2 and table 1 compare the resultant motorized system and change from alternative 1 for each alternative.

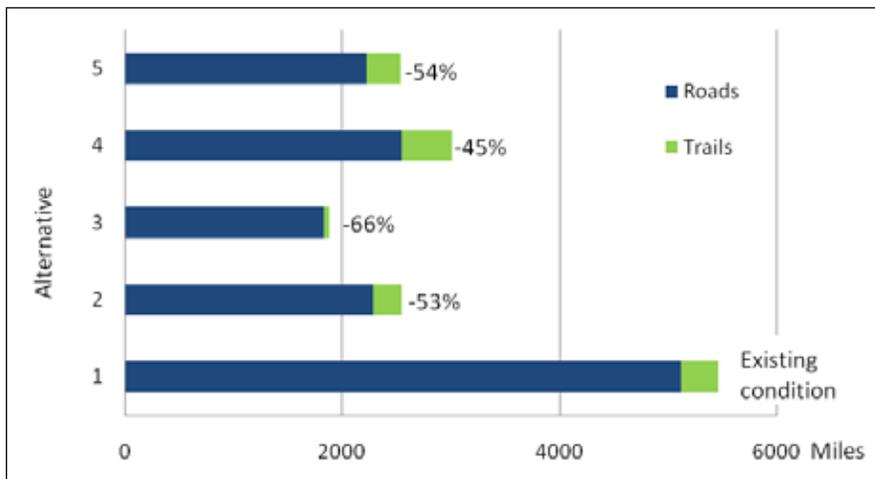


Figure 1. Summary of the roads and trails that would result from each alternative, and their overall change from alternative 1, the existing condition

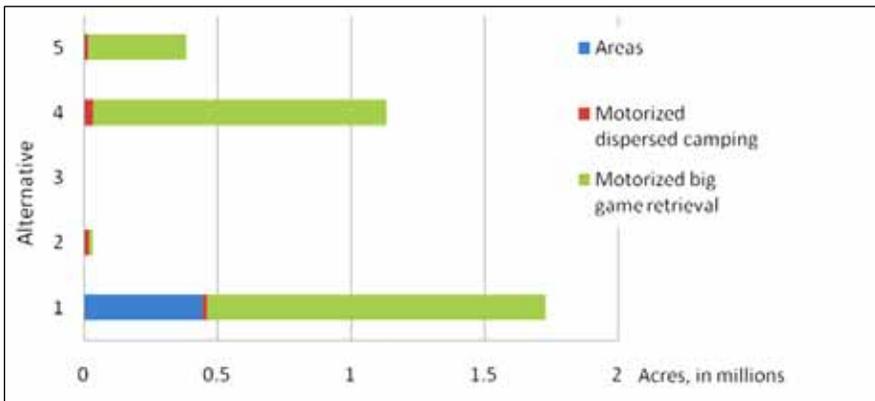


Figure 2. Comparison of acres available for driving off road, by alternative. Percent change is not depicted because the acres overlap in use. For instance, the corridors for dispersed camping and retrieving big game are the same in alternative 2.

Table 1. Comparison of motorized system resulting from changes to alternative 1, the existing condition

Resultant Motorized System		Where People Drive Now	Alternative				
		1	2	3	4	5	
Roads	Miles	5,119	2,290	1,829	2,549	2,231	
	Percent change from alternative 1	--	-55	-64	-50	-56	
Trails	Miles	339	262	53	462	305	
	Percent change from alternative 1	--	-23	-84	36	-10	
Total Roads and Trails	Miles	5,458	2,552	1,882	3,011	2,536	
	Percent change from alternative 1	--	-53	-66	-45	-54	
Areas	Acres	443,848	40	0	49	35	
	Percent change from alternative 1	--	-100	-100	-100	-100	
Motorized Access to Dispersed Camping	Acres	17,076	16,340	0	33,079	11,536	
	Percent change from alternative 1	--	-4	-100	94	-32	
Motorized Access for Big Game Retrieval	Acres	1,266,910	16,340	0	1,098,618	370,300	
	Percent change from alternative 1	--	-99	-100	-13	-71	

Conclusions about the Effects of the Alternatives

The effects of this project can be split roughly into two types: (1) effects to people and how they use the forest, called “social effects,” and (2) effects to natural and cultural resources. Social effects include things like opportunities for motorized access and recreation, motorized access to private land, noise, conflicts between people, and loss of jobs and revenue associated with motorized use of the national forest. Natural and cultural resources include soil, water, habitat for fish and wildlife, nonnative invasive plants, cultural resource sites, air, wildfires, and visual quality. The draft environmental impact statement examines effects to these and other resources in detail in chapter 3. This summary highlights the change in motorized opportunities and effects to natural and cultural resources because the public indicated these things were the most important to them.

For motorized opportunities, choosing any of the action alternatives (2 through 5) significantly reduces where people can drive in the Santa Fe National Forest from the existing condition. The total amount of roads and trails open for motorized use would be reduced by 45 to 66 percent depending on the alternative selected, and virtually no driving off roads or trails would be

Summary

allowed. People's ability to drive to a dispersed campsite or to retrieve game would be restricted to corridors designated for such use.

Limiting where people can drive may alter some people's ability to enjoy the national forest in the manner they are accustomed to. Being able to drive on about half as many roads and trails means people might not be able to drive to their recreational destination. This applies to motorized and non-motorized uses of the forest. Some people may no longer be able to get to a hiking spot, for instance. For those with limited time or physical ability, some destinations would thus be rendered inaccessible. Exploring or touring by driving off roads or trails would no longer be allowed. Some people's favorite trails would not be open to motorcycles or ATVs. Some people indicated that curtailing motorized use of the national forest unacceptably limits their freedom.

That said, people who value motorized access and recreation are most likely to favor alternative 4 because it preserves more motorized opportunities than the other action alternatives. Though the biggest change is between alternative 1 and the others, drivers and riders would want to forfeit as few motorized opportunities as possible.

Fewer open routes and less motorized use tend to be more protective of natural and cultural resources. As a result, choosing any of the action alternatives (2 through 5) tends to vastly increase the protection of natural and cultural resources from the existing condition. By these criteria, alternative 3 would best protect natural and cultural resources because it provides the fewest motorized opportunities. The difference in effects between alternatives 2 through 5, however, is not exceptionally pronounced for most resources. None of the action alternatives has effects that would create unacceptable negative effects to resources. For example, none guarantees the recovery of a species, but all would improve habitats for most species to varying degrees. Another example is that cultural resource sites would be equally protected under any of the action alternatives because sites would be avoided.

Most natural and cultural resources would benefit from any of the action alternatives. But a few resources—soil, water, and fish—have exceptions. The motorized dispersed camping proposed in alternative 4 would move soil and water quality away from the desired conditions listed in the forest plan and the Clean Water Act. Alternatives 4 and 5 propose a motorized trail that runs partially up Polvadera Creek, home to one of the Santa Fe National Forest's core conservation populations of Rio Grande cutthroat trout.

Decision to Be Made

Based on the effects to social, natural, and cultural resources, the forest supervisor will decide what changes to make to the current motorized travel system. The "record of decision," which we will publish after analyzing the public's comments on this draft environmental impact statement, documents the decision and the rationale for it.