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## **Ouachita National Forest Makes Travel Management Decision**

Designations to Take Effect This Spring

**HOT SPRINGS, AR --** Ouachita National Forest managers have announced that a decision regarding the travel management project at least 4 years in the making has been made. The forestwide project, which covers public lands managed by the Forest Service in Arkansas and Oklahoma, will be ready for implementation in spring 2010.

In 2005, the Forest Service issued a Travel Management Rule which called for each of America's 155 National Forests to designate a travel system for motorized vehicles, including Off Highway Vehicles (OHVs). The rule was established to limit harmful environmental impacts associated with unregulated OHV use on National Forest land.

For the Ouachita National Forest, the biggest change is that most cross country travel, either on user created trails or just riding through the forest on an OHV, will be eliminated. According to Forest Supervisor Norm Wagoner, cross country travel is a contributor to natural resource damage on the Forest. "Most OHV operators ride legally and sensibly and have been responsible in their use of the National Forest," he said. "But in order for the Forest to balance the desires of off-highway riders with the responsibility to maintain a healthy and sustainable forest, it required a project like this that took a hard look at the problems and then designated routes that allow access, protect against damage and result in a sustainable travel system."

Public input was important in shaping the final project. For instance, not included in the initial proposal, but part of the new decision, is an option for large game hunters to retrieve legally downed game within game retrieval corridors which cover up to ½ mile on either side of some designated routes. A relatively high percentage of the forest is within the ½ mile game retrieval corridors. Also included in the decision are roads that will be seasonally opened during October, November and December when the majority of big game hunts occur in Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Another instance of public input shaping the project includes the designation of some spur roads to access dispersed campsites across the forest. These sites have historical significance for many campers that return to the same remote spot in the woods with family and friends year after year. By identifying spur roads, some of the dispersed campsites can be directly accessed by a motor vehicle. Others are within a short walk from a designated route.

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Off-highway vehicle operators will see different opportunities at the popular Wolf-Pen Gap Trail system near Mena, AR. The 31 miles of loop trails will be designated as open routes on weekends and holidays between May 15<sup>th</sup> and September 15<sup>th</sup>. The change is due to adverse effects on water quality through sedimentation linked in part to current OHV use in the area.

Wagoner said the new designation will improve water quality and reduce natural resource damage, but will still allow riders to enjoy the trail system and the natural resources that attracted so many people to the forest in the first place.

With designated routes in place, officials say it will be up to the operators to ensure they are riding legally. When implemented in the spring, routes will easily be identified by obtaining a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) from the local Ranger District office. The map will be the legal document that spells out where the route is, what type of motorized vehicle use is appropriate, and when it is open. The travel management project will not govern use on state highways or county roads in any way.

The project designates existing Forest Service system routes and trails that follow safety and resource protection guidelines. This was done on a Forest-wide scale with public involvement. The new route system will be implemented beginning in early spring 2010 with approximately 3,100 miles of existing forest system roads and trails available for various types of motorized use.

Forest officials say, however, that options for additional or different routes still exist. Each local Ranger District conducts a variety of environmental reviews and analysis as part of day to day business each year. Some of these analyses will examine the feasibility and effects of adding or modifying route designations.

“The public will have an important role to play in future route designations,” said Wagoner. “I encourage people to continue to work with the district office where they enjoy riding to share suggestions for potential trails or volunteer their group to help the Forest develop and maintain new designated routes.”

Maps will be available at Forest Service offices in Arkansas and Oklahoma when the plan is implemented in early spring. For more information on the Travel Management Project, or to view small maps online, log on to [www.aokforests.com](http://www.aokforests.com) or call the Ranger District office nearest you.

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