



File Code: 1950/2300/7700

Date: February 21, 2008

Dear Forest Shareholder:

I am contacting you with additional information on the Travel Management Project and extending an invitation to submit comments on this project. Agency regulations establish a process by which the public receives notice and is provided an opportunity to comment on proposed actions for projects and activities implementing a land and resource management plan prior to a decision by the Responsible Official [36 CFR 215(a)]. Pursuant to these regulations, commenting during this formal notice and comment period will afford you standing to appeal the subsequent project decision(s), should you desire.

If you have already submitted comments (for example, at one of the 2007 Travel Management Open Houses, in response to the December Project Announcement (scoping) Letter, or through an office visit up until the day before the comment period begins) you must still comment during this formal 30-day notice and comment period in order to have standing to appeal. This action is mandated by the Appeals Reform Act.

In contrast, scoping is a “process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed” (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping is not limited to a single point in time; we will continue to accept and consider comments until implementation decision(s) are made. The comments received thus far have been used to identify public concerns, develop issues, and shape possible alternatives to the Proposed Action.

### **Description of Detailed Proposed Action**

We are proposing to designate a system of roads and trails for public use of motorized vehicles, including Off-Highway Vehicles (OHVs) and, at the same time, limit motorized vehicles for the most part to those designated roads and trails. Most roads and trails on the Ouachita National Forest would remain open to the same kinds of public motor vehicle uses that are currently permitted. Although these currently open roads and trails would appear on the Motor Vehicle Use Maps to be published after the NEPA process is completed, they are not the focus of the environmental analysis to be conducted. Our environmental analysis will be based on changes to the existing system of roads and trails, including changes in seasonality or type of use permitted and road closures.

This proposal, known as the Travel Management Project, would be implemented throughout the Ouachita National Forest, located in western Arkansas (Ashley, Garland, Hot Spring, Howard, Logan, Montgomery, Perry, Pike, Polk, Saline, Scott, Sebastian, and Yell Counties) and southeastern Oklahoma (LeFlore and McCurtain Counties). As of September 2007, the Ouachita National Forest was comprised of approximately 1,435,000 National Forest System (NFS) acres in Arkansas and 355,000 NFS acres in Oklahoma.

The first two tables below provide **a summary of all roads and motorized trails that would be designated open for public use if the designations were implemented as proposed** (types of designations listed in the tables are mutually exclusive):



Proposed Action, Part A <b>Designated Road Use</b>	Estimated Miles		
	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
Highway (Hwy) and OHV – year round <sup>1</sup>	1,525	287	1,812
Hwy only – year round <sup>2</sup>	599	356	955
Hwy year round – Seasonal OHV <sup>3</sup>	110	2	112
OHV year round – Seasonal Hwy <sup>4</sup>	14	0	14
Seasonal – Hwy only <sup>5</sup>	52	31	83
Seasonal – OHV and Hwy <sup>6</sup>	257	36	293

- 1-Roads open to all vehicles, yearlong
- 2-Roads open to highway legal vehicles only, yearlong
- 3-Roads open to highway legal vehicles yearlong and open to OHVs seasonally
- 4-Roads open to OHVs yearlong and open to highway legal vehicles seasonally
- 5-Roads open to highway legal vehicles, seasonally
- 6-Roads open to all vehicles, seasonally

Proposed Action, Part B <b>Designated Trail Use</b>	Estimated Miles		
	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
ATV and motorcycle <sup>1</sup>	92	37	129
Motorcycle only <sup>2</sup>	0	13	13

- 1-Trails open to vehicles 50 inches or less in width
- 2-Trails open to motorcycles

Parts A and B of the Proposed Action summarize the proposed system of roads and trails that would be open to motor vehicle use by the public. At the same time routes are being considered for various designations allowing public motor vehicle use, some currently open National Forest System roads are proposed to be closed. These proposed road closures are Part C of the Proposed Action, as summarized in the following tabulation:

Proposed Action, Part C <b>Open Roads to be Closed</b>	Estimated Miles		
	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
	74	393	467

Proposed Action maps displaying route designations and open roads (proposed) to be closed are available for viewing at [www.aokforests.com](http://www.aokforests.com), this office, and at Ranger District offices of the Ouachita National Forest.

As previously noted, our environmental analysis will be based on changes to the existing system of roads and motorized trails (trails on which motor vehicle use is permitted). The following table lists the proposed *changes* from the existing or current transportation system of roads and trails:

Designated Road Use	Change from Current Road Use (miles)		
	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
Highway (Hwy) and OHV – year round	-796	-750	-1,546
Hwy only – year round	+599	+356	+955
Hwy year round – Seasonal OHV	+110	+2	+112
OHV year round – Seasonal Hwy	+14	No change	+14
Seasonal – Hwy only	+52	+31	+83
Seasonal – OHV and Hwy	-52	-31	-83
Designated Trail Use	Change from Current Trail Use (miles)		
	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
ATV and motorcycle	+15	+37	+52
Motorcycle only	No change	-36	-36

In addition to these road and trail use designations, the proposal includes limited use of motor vehicles for big game retrieval and dispersed camping. OHV use (3-wheelers, 4-wheelers, and UTVs such as “gators,” “mules,” “rangers,” etc.) would be allowed off designated routes (forest floor travel) for retrieval of legally killed black bear and white-tailed deer under the following circumstances:

- During October and November (during state-specified black bear and white-tailed deer seasons) and
- Vehicle operator/hunter must have in possession a valid hunting license and tagged, downed deer or bear (animal must be on vehicle when observed by law enforcement officer/wildlife officer or hunter must take officer to animal) and
- Within ½ mile of one or both sides of certain routes designated open for any vehicle use. Places where bear/deer retrieval would not be available on one or both sides of certain routes include:
  - Wilderness, most of MA 20 (wild and scenic river corridors), most walk-in turkey areas, parts of MA 19 in Oklahoma (botanical areas, scenic areas), Research Natural Areas, other botanical areas or special habitats, protected heritage sites, within 100 feet of streams and riparian areas [stream crossing allowed only by travel on roads(s) or trail(s) designated open], and steep slopes (this is not an exhaustive list)

Proposed Action <b>OHV Use for Game Retrieval</b> (within ½ mile of one or both sides of certain routes designated open for any vehicle use)	Estimated Miles of Routes		
	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
	2,172	640	2,812

Motorized vehicle use would be allowed to access dispersed camping sites under the following circumstances:

- Dispersed camping sites at designated locations (as signed and/or indicated on a Motor Vehicle Use Map—MVUM—in force at the time)
- Within 300 feet of certain designated routes (as indicated on an MVUM in force at the time)

Proposed Action <b>Motorized Vehicle Use for Dispersed Camping Access</b>	Arkansas	Oklahoma	Forest Total
Designated campsite locations	942	0	942
Miles of certain designated routes with 300 ft camping corridors	736	640	1376

In addition, vehicles would be able to park legally up to one vehicle length from the edge of all roads designated for motorized use and where National Forest System lands abut county, state, or other road jurisdictions.

A forest plan amendment would be required to allow motor vehicle use for dispersed camping and big game retrieval in the Management Areas listed below that are currently shown in the plan as “suitable for designated routes only.”

MA 1b – Poteau Mountain Management Area

MA 14 – Ouachita Mountains, Habitat Diversity Emphasis

MA 15 – West Gulf Coastal Plain-Habitat Diversity Emphasis

MA 16 – Lands Surrounding Lake Ouachita and Broken Bow Lake

MA 17 – Semi-Primitive Areas

MA 19 – Winding Stair Mountain National Recreation Area and Associated Non-Wilderness Designations

MA 20 – Wild and Scenic River Corridors and Recommended Wild and Scenic River Corridors

MA 21 – Old Growth Restoration

MA 22 – Renewal of the Shortleaf Pine-Bluestem Grass Ecosystem and Red-cockaded Woodpecker (RCW) Habitat

Proposed Action maps displaying route designations, game retrieval corridors, dispersed camping corridors, designated campsites and open roads to be closed are available for viewing at [www.aokforests.com](http://www.aokforests.com), this office, and at Ranger District offices.

## **Past and Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions**

Cumulative impact refers to effects on the environment which result from the incremental impact of the proposed action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions (40 CFR 1508.7). In order to determine cumulative impacts for this project, the effects of other actions that overlap in time and space with the effects of this proposed action will be included in this analysis. These spatial and temporal bounds will be determined for each resource.

## **Purpose and Need for the Project**

Contrasts between current and desired conditions illustrate the need for proposed management activities. The Revised Land and Resource Management Plan (Revised Forest Plan) for the Ouachita National Forest describes *Desired Conditions* for the Transportation System as follows:

The transportation system of roads and trails is safe, affordable, and environmentally sound, responds to public needs, and is efficient to manage. The system provides public access for recreation, special uses, and fire protection activities and supports Forest management objectives. The system is well maintained commensurate with levels of use and available funding. The system is connected to state, county, or local public roads and trails. Unnecessary roads and trails are removed and the landscape restored. Rights-of-way to access National Forest System lands satisfy public needs and facilitate planned resource activities. Over the planning period, the number of inventoried unclassified roads and trails is reduced, and the development and proliferation of new unclassified roads is minimized.

Recreation opportunities for OHV (Off-Highway Vehicle) enthusiasts will be available within an integrated system of designated roads and trails. Designated OHV routes provide a high-quality OHV experience. Conflicts between OHV enthusiasts and other recreational uses, with private lands and homeowners adjacent to National Forest land, and with resource issues are addressed and resolved in a timely manner. Resolutions are consistent with area objectives and management direction. (Revised Forest Plan, p. 24)

### ***Current Conditions:***

Public use of OHVs is allowed on routes and in areas (cross-country travel) where such use is not prohibited. Routes closed to vehicle use by a gate, berm, or other obvious means and areas posted closed to cross-country travel by motorized vehicle (e.g., wildernesses, walk-in turkey hunting areas during certain seasons, portions of wild and scenic river corridors) are unavailable for public use of OHVs.

Unmanaged OHV use creates many miles of user-created trails. These user-created trails typically result in soil stability problems, erosion, stream sedimentation, the spread of invasive species, pollution, habitat fragmentation and disturbance of wildlife including sensitive and protected species.

On November 9, 2005, the Department of Agriculture published the Final Rule for Travel Management; Designated Routes and Areas for Motor Vehicle Use; 36 CFR Parts 212, 251, 261, and 295 (70 Fed. Reg. 68,290). This final rule requires designation of roads, trails, and areas that are open to motor vehicle use. Under the rule, motor vehicle use off designated routes and outside designated areas is prohibited once such designations are published on a motor vehicle use map (MVUM).

The purpose of this project is to implement the travel management rule and to implement the following *Priorities and Objectives*:

Designate and sign a system of designated routes suitable for recreational travel by motorized vehicles, including off-highway vehicles. (Revised Forest Plan, p. 65)

Designate and sign a system of roads and trails suitable for public access by motor vehicle, including off-highway vehicles, no later than October 2009\*; at the same time, initiate the process to prohibit cross country travel by motorized vehicles except for emergency purposes and specific authorized uses. (Revised Forest Plan, p. 65)

Develop and operate a system of OHV routes that satisfies some public demands for motorized recreation and protects environmental quality; maintain routes to agency guidelines, when the latter are published. (Revised Forest Plan, p. 67)

*\*Although the Revised Forest Plan establishes a deadline of October 2009, commitments were made to the Regional Forester to meet a 2008 timeline.*

## **Affected Environment**

The following environmental features or resources may be affected by the proposed activities and will be addressed in the EA: Management Indicator Species; Proposed, Endangered, Threatened and Sensitive Species; recreation opportunities; local economies; water quality; heritage (archeological sites); transportation system; public safety; and soils.

**Management Indicator Species Selected for this Project** –The Revised Forest Plan lists 24 species that should adequately address the effects of Forest management practices on fish and wildlife populations and their habitat needs, as well as demand species and species of special interest. These 24 species, termed “Management Indicator Species” (MIS), represent a broad array of habitats covering diverse geographic areas within the Ouachita National Forest, as well as inhabiting areas with diverse management objectives. Due to the geographical expanse of this project, all MIS were selected at this time. Species will likely be excluded after further analysis.

**Proposed, Endangered, Threatened, and Sensitive (PETS) Species** – The 2001 Ouachita National Forest Sensitive Species List includes both federally listed species and sensitive species from the Regional Forester’s Sensitive Species List. Of these 79 species, the most likely life forms to be affected by the proposed action are vascular plants, mollusks, fish and amphibians.

## **Environmental Issues Related to the Proposed Action**

Scoping identified concerns relating to the effects of the proposal on public access, local economies, public safety, and environmental damage. These effects will be analyzed and disclosed in the EA:

- Loss of existing access for persons with disabilities, hunting (transporting deer stands, scouting, game retrieval), dispersed camping and other recreational uses
- Possible loss of economic benefits to local communities
- Safety hazard of mixed use of different kinds and sizes of vehicles on roads and trails
- Environmental damage due to concentration of use on certain routes

## Alternatives to the Proposed Action

Based on environmental issues identified through scoping, the following alternatives may be considered:

- No Action – This alternative is a requirement of the National Environmental Policy Act and serves as a baseline against which the effects of each action alternative can be compared.
- No Game Retrieval – This alternative would include the same activities as the Proposed Action but motorized vehicle use would not be allowed for game retrieval off designated routes.
- No Road Closure – This alternative would include the same activities as the Proposed Action but no currently open roads would be closed.
- Additional Resource Protection – This alternative would exclude motorized vehicle use on routes in or near areas found to be particularly sensitive to environmental damage (i.e., locations of PETS species at risk from physical damage or sensitive to sediment increases, drinking water sources, etc.)
- Additional Motorized Use – This alternative would include additional motorized use route designations (including OHVs) in response to public input received on the proposed action.

## Remaining Project Planning Steps

After your comments have been received, they will be considered by the interdisciplinary team as it prepares its analysis of environmental effects from the proposal and its alternatives. Individuals responsible for making the final decisions will also review your comments. Two environmental assessments (EAs) will be prepared (one for Arkansas and one for Oklahoma). If no significant environmental effects are found, the Responsible Official(s) will issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), along with a complete EA and a Decision Notice (DN). These documents will be made available electronically, and you will be notified in writing of their availability. If significant environmental effects are identified due to the proposal or its alternatives, we will issue a notice of our intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

## Other Requirements from 36 CFR 215

The 30-day comment period for proposed actions to be analyzed and documented in an EA begins on the first day after publication of the legal notice. Comments must be postmarked or received within 30 days beginning the day after publication of this notice in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*. Oral or hand-delivered comments must be received within our normal business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at this office or any Ranger District office. Comments may be mailed electronically to this office, in a common digital format, at [comments-southern-ouachita@fs.fed.us](mailto:comments-southern-ouachita@fs.fed.us). Hard-copy comments should be mailed to this office, addressed to ONF Travel Management Planning, PO Box 1270, Hot Springs, AR 71902. Only individuals or organizations that provide comments or otherwise express interest by the close of the 30-day comment period will be eligible to appeal the subsequent project decision(s). You must provide the following: your name and address, title of the proposed action, and signature or other verification of identity upon request. Comments will be addressed in the project file.

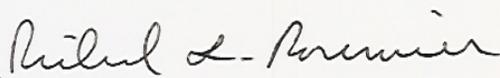
The final project decision is expected in June, 2008. The project activities would be implemented immediately upon publication of the MVUMs, anticipated in October 2008.

Additional information may be obtained from the following contacts:

Liz Gross	Caddo-Womble RD	(870) 867 - 4555 ext. 106
Robin Vaughn	Jessieville-Winona-Fourche RD	(501) 984 - 5313 ext. 108
Jim Zornes	Mena-Oden RD	(479) 394 - 5595 ext. 237
Randy Sander	Oklahoma RD	(580) 286 - 6564 ext. 106
John Strom	Poteau-Cold Springs RD	(479) 675 - 3233
Alett Little	Supervisor's Office	(501) 321 - 5372

Thank you for your continued participation in the management of the Ouachita National Forest.

Sincerely,

  
for/ NORMAN L. WAGONER  
Forest Supervisor