

Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Public Motorized Travel Management Plan Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests

Apache, Navajo, Greenlee and Coconino Counties, Arizona

Lead Agency: USDA Forest Service

Responsible Official: Forest Supervisor
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Abstract: To comply with the Travel Management Rule (TMR), the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests propose to provide for a system of National Forest System (NFS) roads and motorized trails designated for motor vehicle use. As required in the TMR, the forests would prohibit motor vehicle use off the designated system. The proposed changes take into account opportunities to reduce impacts to biological, physical, and cultural resources. Five alternatives, including no action, were analyzed. All action alternatives would amend the “Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan.” All action alternatives would propose changes to designations of NFS roads and motorized trails for motor vehicle use. Included in the designations would be the limited use of motor vehicles within a specified distance of designated routes solely for the purpose of dispersed camping. Three action alternatives would designate corridors for motor vehicle use within a specified distance of designated routes solely for the purpose of big game retrieval.

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.

Send Comments to: Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests: Travel Management
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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 (NOA) is published in the Federal Register. The Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests will post the due date for comments to the Web site at: www.fs.fed.us/r3/asnf/projects/travel-management.

Summary

To comply with the Travel Management Rule, the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests (referred to as forests or ASNFs) propose to provide for a system of National Forest System (NFS) roads, trails, and areas designated for motor vehicle use. This road and motorized trail system would provide access to the forest while protecting physical, biological and cultural resources. The proposed changes do not restrict where people's non-motorized activities may take place.

Background

To address concerns about the effects of unmanaged off-highway vehicles (OHVs), 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 by vehicle class and if appropriate, by time of year, for motor vehicle use. After these roads, trails, and areas are designated, motor vehicle use, not in accordance with these designations is prohibited..."

A motor vehicle use map (MVUM) published by the forests 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 for Action

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 that reduces impacts to biological, physical, and cultural resources on the forests (36 CFR 212, sections 212, 251, 261). At 36 CFR 261.13, the forests are required to prohibit motor vehicle use off the system of designated roads, trails, and areas, and motor vehicle use that is not in accordance with the designations.

There is a need for a safe and efficient transportation system for public use, Agency administration, and resource protection, while recognizing historic and current uses of the forests. Specifically, there is a need for: (1) identifying the system of roads that would be open to motor vehicle use; (2) identifying the system of motorized trails for vehicles 50 inches or less in width; and (3) the optional designation of the limited use of motor vehicles within a specified distance of designated routes solely for the purposes of dispersed camping or retrieval of big game by an individual who has legally killed the animal.

There is a need to counter detrimental effects to resources from continued use of some roads and motorized trails, as well as cross-country travel. Some detrimental effects from motorized use of the forests include increased sediment deposits in streams which degrade water quality and fish habitat, the spread of invasive plants across the forests, disturbances to a variety of plant and wildlife species, and the risk of damaging cultural resource sites.

Public Involvement

Beginning in 2005 and continuing through 2008, the forests hosted and participated in 31 public meetings and workshops related to motorized travel management. This preliminary, pre-NEPA public input was used to develop the initial proposed action. On October 10, 2007, a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) for motorized travel on the forests was published in the Federal Register. A correction to the miles of road on the transportation system and the availability of maps to the general public was published on October 31, 2007.

The forests conducted public meetings in November 2007 to present the proposed action. After consideration of the input received during those meetings, the forest supervisor modified the proposed action and included more miles of corridors for dispersed camping, increased the acres of the areas designated for motorized use, and slightly increased the miles of motorized trails. A new NOI was published in the Federal Register on February 29, 2008, on the modified proposed action. Additional public meetings were held in March 2008. Coordination with local governments has occurred since this period. The forests have received over 20,000 comments from 2005 through 2008. These comments have been incorporated into the development of alternatives B through E.

Tribal Consultation

The ASNF consulted with nine tribes and one chapter that use the ASNFs for traditional, cultural, or spiritual activities. These tribes were informed about travel management in October 2007 as part of the NEPA process. A followup consultation letter was sent in July 2008 regarding the modified proposed action. Consultation meetings were held with three tribes. The forests are in the process of scheduling meetings with the Pueblo of Zuni and San Carlos Apache Tribe. Concerns identified by the tribes have been taken into consideration and were incorporated into the development of alternatives.

Issues

The forests analyzed all comments to identify issues, which are defined as cause-effect relationships directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposed action. The issues defined as within the scope of the project, and directly or indirectly caused by implementing the proposal, were used to develop the range of action alternatives.

Issue 1: Restricting Motorized Access for Dispersed Camping

Concern: Restricting motorized access for dispersed camping may increase interactions between campers and diminish the quality of experience. Designating routes and corridors for camping may eliminate favorite spots which have been used for decades.

Response: All alternatives provide open roads to access dispersed camping. Alternative B (modified proposed action) and alternative D increase the miles of camping corridors and roads that access identified dispersed camping over what is currently available.

Issue 2: Restricting Motorized Big Game Retrieval

Concern: Changing the motorized big game retrieval policy to a fixed distance corridor may result in hunters being unable to collect a downed animal in a timely manner.

Response: Alternatives B, C, and D respond to this issue by including motorized big game retrieval for several animal species.

Issue 3: Impacts to Resources from Motorized Use

Concern: Adding roads and camping corridors to the transportation system will adversely impact terrestrial and aquatic wildlife species, soil and water, and cultural resources.

Response: Alternative E was developed to provide motorized access with minimal miles of camping corridors and no motorized big game retrieval.

Issue 4: Economics: Loss of Revenues and Jobs

Concern: Restrictions on motorized access (a change from the current condition) could negatively impact local and state economies from a loss of local, tourist, and hunter generated revenues.

Response: The social and economic impacts the project would have on the region have been analyzed in chapter 3.

Alternatives

Alternative A (no action) represents the existing transportation system and proposes no changes. Cross-country travel off system roads on around 1.6 million acres would continue, except where currently prohibited.

Alternative B (modified proposed action and the preferred alternative) would eliminate motorized cross-country travel and designate a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized use (table 1). The road system would have 5.6 percent fewer roads and 72 percent more motorized trails than the current system. Corridors would be designated 300 feet from either side of around 25 percent of the designated open roads (658 miles) for the sole purpose of accessing dispersed camping locations with motor vehicles. Motorized big game retrieval (MBGR) would be allowed within a 1-mile distance off the designated road and motorized trail system (1.2 million acres). There would be five motorized use areas designated on two ranger districts (459 acres).

Alternative C would eliminate motorized cross-country travel and designate a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized use (table 1). The road system would have 1 percent more roads and the same miles of motorized trails as the current system. Twenty-eight miles of unauthorized roads would be added to the system, providing general access as well as motorized access to dispersed camping locations. MBGR would be allowed within a 1-mile distance off the designated road and motorized trail system (1.2 million acres).

Alternative D would eliminate motorized cross-country travel and designate a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized use (table 1). The road system would have 3.6 percent fewer roads and 93 percent more motorized trails than the current system. Corridors would be designated 300 feet from either side of around 75 percent of the designated open roads (2,034 miles) for the sole

Summary

purpose of accessing dispersed camping locations with motor vehicles. MBGR would be allowed within a ¼-mile distance off the designated road and motorized trail system (700,000 acres). There would be five motorized use areas designated on two ranger districts (459 acres).

Alternative E would eliminate motorized cross-country travel and designate a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized use (table 1). The road system would have 12.7 percent fewer roads and 31 percent more motorized trails than the current system. Corridors would be designated 300 feet from either side of around 5 percent of the designated open roads (118 miles) for the sole purpose of accessing dispersed camping locations with motor vehicles. MBGR would not be allowed off the designated system of roads and motorized trails.

Table 1. Comparison of road and motorized trail changes proposed by alternative

Action Proposed	Alt. A	Alt. B	Alt. C	Alt. D	Alt. E
National Forest System Roads (miles)					
Add unauthorized roads	0	53	28	37	64
Open closed NFS roads	0	358	0	415	220
Close NFS roads to all motor vehicles	0	493	0	479	559
Restrict currently open NFS roads to administrative and permitted use only	0	77	0	75	84
Total Miles Open Roads	2,832	2,673	2,860	2,730	2,473
Total Miles Closed Roads	3,373	3,866	3,373	3,852	3,932
National Forest System Trails (miles)					
Convert closed roads to trails for motor vehicles 50 inches or less in width	0	60	0	64	14
Convert open roads to trails for motor vehicles 50 inches or less in width	0	16	0	19	14
Add unauthorized roads as trails for motor vehicles 50 inches or less in width	0	34	0	62	20
Construct new trails for motor vehicles 50 inches or less in width	0	2	0	1	1
Total Miles Motorized Trails	156	268	156	302	205

Conclusions About the Effects of the Alternatives

The forests’ road system was not designed for the primary purpose of meeting today’s recreational needs; rather it began as access for timber removal and mining. The ability of the public to move around within the forests using motor vehicles is integral to the many recreation activities available. Visitors are not only using vehicles to get from one point to another, they are operating vehicles in a rural setting as a part of the recreational experience.

A general summary of the effects to resources from changes in the designated road and motorized trail system is provided here. The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) examines direct,

indirect, and cumulative effects to the physical and social environments in and around the forests in detail in chapter 3.

Under alternative A, motorized cross-country travel, dispersed camping and MBGR would continue forestwide. It would be expected that with increasing populations, cross-country travel would increase causing resource damage. There would be increased mixed-user conflicts, associated noise levels, creation of user-created roads with resource damage and public safety concerns, and the creation of additional dispersed camping locations; some near riparian areas. This alternative would not provide additional motorized trail opportunities including loop trails.

Indirect effects to visitors seeking non-motorized opportunities would be high under alternative A, since cross-country motorized use would continue at present levels. These effects would include an increase in conflict with motorized users for recreation, hunting, noise, in transition areas between motorized and non-motorized uses, and along private lands. There would also be increased noise in semiprimitive nonmotorized and primitive settings.

Under the action alternatives (B, C, D, and E), the elimination of motorized cross-country travel on the forests would result in beneficial impacts on resources such as soils, water, vegetation, fish, wildlife, and cultural resources. This could provide negative impacts to motor vehicle users who enjoy traveling off the designated system of roads and trails under current conditions. The road and motorized trail systems, however, would continue to provide motorized recreation opportunities across the forests.

Since there would be limited change in activities by alternative related to jobs and economics, there would be no measurable direct and indirect effects on the economy relative to the scale. The employment and income figures representing the contribution of current activities to the economy of the assessment area (six counties) would be unchanged or changed so slightly they cannot be evaluated.

Effects on MBGR under alternatives B and C are not expected to be much different from current conditions under this alternative since MBGR is still allowed on around 80 percent of the area currently open. Under alternative C, around 44 percent would be open to MBGR of the area currently open. There could also be potential for user conflicts between hunters using motor vehicles to retrieve game and those who do not. Alternative E would not allow MBGR, and AGFD could have issues meeting its harvest objectives, meat could be spoiled, hunters could be injured by not being assisted with motor vehicles to retrieve game, and impacts to vegetation from elk grazing could increase. There would still be access into the forests on the designated road and motorized trail system, which could be used for game retrieval only on the designated routes and hunter's would not be precluded from using non-motorized means of retrieving a downed animal.

On routes that are used repeatedly for MBGR (alternatives B, C, and D), there could be some resource damage from motor vehicle use, although it is not expected that this would occur very often. Additionally, there is expected to be some areas with concentrated use of dispersed camping within the corridors, resulting in some resource impacts to riparian areas, streams, and vegetation. Beneficial effects would occur to vegetation from elimination of motorized cross-country travel. Limited effects from crushing and burying plants with sediment in areas where motorized off-road travel would occur (dispersed camping corridors, within MBGR distances, and areas).

Summary

Compared to alternative A, the action alternatives would have reduced potential to spread weed seeds due to the elimination of motorized cross-country travel. Potential to spread seeds would exist in areas where off-road travel is allowed (dispersed camping corridors, MBGR areas, and areas) and drainages along roads and trails. Likewise, impacts to soil productivity and sediment loading into streams would be improved. There would still be impacts, however, to soil productivity and water quality, relative to the number of roads and motorized trails proposed by alternative.

There would be impacts to wildlife and fish species under all alternatives (A, B, C, D, and E). There are four federally listed wildlife species and two areas of associated critical habitat. The effect of any alternative on those species is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of Mexican wolves and not likely to adversely affect (NLAA) Mexican spotted owl and critical habitat, southwestern willow flycatcher and critical habitat, and Chiricahua leopard frog. There are 58 Forest Service sensitive wildlife species and the effect of any alternative may impact individuals or habitat, but is not likely to contribute to the trend toward Federal listing (MIIH). There are 17 management indicator species (MIS) and the effect of any alternative would maintain forestwide habitat and population trends; action alternatives may improve trends from reduced off-road travel. There are 34 migratory bird species with no effect to populations under any alternative, and the action alternatives may improve some habitats.

There are seven threatened or endangered fish species, one candidate fish species, and four areas of associated critical habitats. Aquatic habitat for fish results in negative effects under all alternatives due to added sediment in drainages from the presence of roads and trails near surface water, road/stream crossings, and off-road travel; the amount of impacts varies by alternative based on the routes proposed (the action alternatives greatly reduce areas open to off-road travel, benefiting all fish species). The effects for the fish species are: seven species may effect, likely to adversely affect (LAA), one species may effect, not likely to adversely affect (NLAA), three critical habitats LAA, and one critical habitat NLAA. There are five Forest Service sensitive fish species and the effect of any alternative may impact individuals or habitats, but would not likely contribute to a trend toward Federal listing or cause a loss of viability to the population or species (MIIH).

Under alternative A, there would be no adverse effect to cultural resource sites, however, there would be a high potential from unauthorized routes and motorized cross-country travel to impact sites. The action alternatives would have no adverse effect to cultural resource sites, and mitigation measures would be adhered to. The number of sites potentially impacted varies by alternative.

Under the action alternatives, non-motorized users would continue to share the majority of the roads and trails with motorized users; however, the elimination of cross-country motorized travel would produce beneficial impacts to non-motorized recreation. There would be a reduction of roads in primitive and semiprimitive nonmotorized settings. User conflicts related to noise, traffic, dust, etc., would be reduced to a certain extent; although, incompatible recreation conflicts would continue in popular areas located in close proximity to motorized routes.

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 to be compliant with the TMR. The

decision will also include whether to provide motorized access for dispersed camping, whether to designate motorized use areas, and whether to provide access for motorized big game retrieval. The record of decision (ROD), which will be published after analyzing the public's comments on the DEIS, will document the decision with the rationale.