



**Changes to Motor Vehicle Access
PROPOSED ACTION
Coconino National Forest
November 2015**



Introduction

The Coconino National Forest is considering changes to which roads, trails, and areas are open to motor vehicle use on the Forest and would like your input. In September 2011, the Coconino National Forest completed analysis of motorized use designations required by the Travel Management Rule (TMR; 36 CFR 212). Since this decision, the Forest has received helpful feedback to modify road, trail and area designations to better support a fun, safe, and ecologically sustainable motorized roads system. To make these designation changes, the Forest is initiating the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) planning process to receive specific feedback on the proposed motor vehicle use designation changes.

Background

This planning process is meant to build on the 2011 Coconino National Forest Travel Management EIS decision. The Forest spent approximately 6 years and considered almost 4,000 comments as part of this process. The resulting decision designated roads, trails and areas as open or closed to motorized use, designated 300-foot motorized camping corridors, and designated areas on the forest where driving off-road for motorized game retrieval could occur. Information on roads open to motorized use was then made available to the public through a Motor Vehicle Use Map (MVUM) and electronic travel aids. The current route and area designations based on this decision and subsequent decisions and corrections can be found here: <http://go.usa.gov/PEa>

The September 2011 decision meets the requirements of the 2005 Travel Management Rule regulations and provides a good starting point for balancing resource protection with motorized use and access. Yet, given the scale and complexity of managing for motorized access and use in a changing world, future planning efforts are likely to improve Forest access and resource protection. The original 2011 decision acknowledged this need for future adjustment and adaptation:

This decision is not the end of planning for management of motorized use on the Coconino National Forest, but the beginning. Considering this decision includes the cumulative input of thousands of comments on almost 8,000 miles of road, it is likely there will be errors that weren't detected, there will be changes that are needed due to changing conditions, and we will find out that some of the

rules may result in unforeseen circumstances in some locations. It is important that the reader understand that the point of this decision is to provide a starting point for management of motor vehicle use on the Coconino National Forest in compliance with the 2005 Travel Management Rule. I fully commit to additional motorized route planning and making changes to motorized use management through the National Environmental Policy Act to continue improvement of forest access, motorized recreation, and the protection of forest resources for current and future generations.

Since this decision, the Forest has been continuously soliciting feedback from Forest visitors, organizations, Tribes, and local, State and Federal agencies. The Forest also established a system for monitoring the implementation of route and area designations for motor vehicle use to regularly consider and re-evaluate route designations based on public input. Some inquiries revealed simple mapping or signage errors, which were then corrected in the annual re-printing of the Motor Vehicle Use Map. Others, such as changing the status of a road from closed to open or changing the allowable distance for off-road travel, require additional environmental analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Monitoring efforts since 2011 have indicated that many of the non-designated roads continue to receive motor vehicle use. The large majority of the public comments and complaints received indicate that Forest users don't understand why roads to existing, hardened motorized dispersed campsites were not designated, and when people feel that the route and area designations don't make sense, they are unlikely to comply with these rules. Monitoring also indicates that focused signage and closure efforts have been very effective at reducing unauthorized motor vehicle use in sensitive areas of the Forest

(http://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd478752.pdf). Based on this information, the Forest hopes to modify the designations to allow more motorized access and motorized recreation opportunity so that signage, closure, and enforcement efforts can be more effectively focused toward protecting wildlife, water quality, soil, scenic, and cultural resources across the Forest.

Since the 2011 decision, there have been several focused efforts to approve designation of additional motorized trails (e.g. the 2012 Kelly Motorized Trails Project), additional seasonal access roads for hunters (and other Forest visitors), and decommissioning of closed roads through the NEPA process. However, the Forest has also received many comments from Forest users who communicated that despite the 6 year planning effort, they were unaware of the previous planning process and that the route designations are too restrictive or could be improved. Many of these forest users provided comments requesting specific changes to route and area designations. There are also many designated roads that are not sustainable and continue to result in ongoing resource degradation. In addition, many non-designated or closed roads where unauthorized motorized use continues to result in impacts to wildlife, water quality,

and cultural resources; which need to be physically revegetated or obliterated. These changes require a comprehensive effort for review and analysis through the NEPA process. These issues form the basis of the project described below.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to improve the management of motorized use on the Coconino National Forest, in response to the issues raised during the feedback and monitoring process. Monitoring clearly indicates that the current program does not meet the public's need for motorized access or in some cases; there is a lack of access to motorized dispersed camping opportunities (i.e., the ability to drive a car or RV off a road to camp). The specific needs identified include:

- The need for motorized access for retrieval of elk, specifically in game management units 5BN and 5BS
- The need for motorized access to existing, hardened motorized campsites
 - o The need for motorized access to existing campsites with RVs
 - o The need for motorized access to existing campsites that are far enough away from the noise and dust of nearby main roads
- The need for motorized access for hunting, motorized recreation and non-motorized recreational opportunities
- The need to remove designation of roads that are resulting in ongoing resource damage by degrading sensitive wildlife habitat, water quality, soils, or cultural resources.
- There is a need to change motor vehicle designations to improve safety by decreasing the potential for injury or vehicle damage from road conditions and mixed traffic.

Monitoring also indicates that there is a need to block and revegetate a number of non-designated roads to move toward these desired conditions.

- Many non-designated roads continue to receive motor vehicle use affecting watershed, wildlife, and cultural resources. These routes need to be physically blocked and/or re-contoured to prevent potential ongoing damage from poor drainage, sedimentation, and unauthorized motor vehicle use.

Lastly, there is a need to move toward desired conditions in the Forest Plan to improve management of motorized use to reduce impacts to special status species and their habitat, reduce impacts to soil and water quality, reduce user conflict, and to reduce impacts to scenic and cultural resources.

Proposed Action

The Coconino National Forest proposes the following actions to meet the purpose of and need for this project:

- Add designation of approximately 60 net miles of motorized camping corridors, along the roads listed in table 1 (below), and maps 1 and 2. Motorized camping corridors would extend 300 feet from either side of the road, except where limited by topographical factors, existing fences, or private land.
- Add designation of 107 net miles of roads to the designated road system, as shown on map 2. Added designated roads would provide access to areas historically used for motorized access and camping. Roads removed from designation would be removed to protect natural resources or reduce user conflict.
- Change designation of approximately 17 miles of roads as shown on map 1 and 2.
- Decommission approximately 7 miles of non-designated roads by blocking and revegetating, or in some cases obliterating the existing road bed using heavy equipment.
- Allow off-road motor vehicle use up to 1 mile from designated roads for retrieval of elk in game management units 5B North and 5B South.

More information on each of these actions is provided below. Table 1 (below) and maps 1 and 2, which are located on the project website: www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=47435

Changes to 300-foot Motorized Camping Corridors

The previous Travel Management Rule Environmental Impact Statement analysis examined approximately 600 miles of road that included motorized camping corridors where vehicles could be drive off-road up to 300 feet for the sole purpose of camping. The Forest has received dozens of comments that there are many designated motorized camping corridors that are not viable for driving off-road to camp and many comments that there are heavily used areas that should have a designated 300-foot motorized camping corridor added to allow motorized access to existing campsites that have been used in this way for many years.

The most prevalent comment received is that the 2011 decision did not designate one or more routes used to access existing motorized campsites. These campsites range from large, existing compacted areas near existing roads with several campfire rings to isolated, simple campfire rings with very occasional use. The Forest evaluated these comments based on the Travel Management regulation's minimization criteria and also considered whether these routes could

be made accessible by designating spur roads to the campsites or whether designating a 300-foot motorized camping corridor would be most effective.

Some roads have corridors proposed along their entire length; other roads may only have portions considered for corridors to avoid areas with resource concerns (such as meadows with sensitive soils) or other issues such as private property. The IDT has conducted an initial screening to identify and eliminate portions of corridors where such concerns are known to exist. If additional issues are discovered during scoping or analysis, corridors will be adjusted accordingly prior to the decision.

Changes to the Designated Roads

Many comments received through monitoring requested that specific roads not-designated (and thus closed) for motorized use be changed to open. There were also several non-system roads (many of which have existed for decades, but were never included in the Forest roads database) identified for designation. Interdisciplinary teams on each Ranger District along with an Arizona Game and Fish Department representative reviewed each comment based on the minimization criteria in the federal regulations. This process verified that several non-designated roads were designated as closed for specific resource concerns, and therefore they will not be carried forward for analysis. The remaining roads, included in this proposal will undergo a more in-depth analysis for impacts to resources resulting from the proposed status change to open. These roads are shown in table Table 1 (below) and on maps 1 and 2.

Approximately 33 miles of roads that are currently listed as open were identified as having serious resource concerns or were unnecessary. To address these concerns, the Forest now proposes to close these roads by removing them as designated routes. The closure of these roads will be evaluated for impacts to other resources including recreational opportunity and access. This information is listed in table 1 (below) and on maps 1 and 2.

Approximately 27 miles of roads will have their designation changed to provide for more accurate indications of route conditions or to provide for improved safety by prohibiting mixed motorized traffic in situations that currently allows for both unlicensed drivers on ATVs/UTVs and full-sized vehicles on roads that can enable higher speeds.

Changes to Motorized Trails

Approximately 4 miles of motorized trail would be designated to provide for motorized access primarily in the Camp Verde area between private lands. This area currently receives very high amounts of unauthorized motor vehicle use and over the past several years a very dense network

of routes has been established. The large majority of this use includes children driving ATV/UTVs after school and local landowners driving from their home to nearby stores along Hwy 260. By designating a motorized trail (which generally coincides with non-designated Forest Roads 9707B, 9207E, and 9207G) to provide motorized access between homes and nearby private commercial areas across National Forest System lands, it is believed that unauthorized motorized use in sensitive areas such as along the Verde River can be more effectively managed to prevent impacts to water quality, soils, and sensitive plants.

Changes to Motorized Big Game Retrieval

The Forest is proposing to allow driving off of designated routes for up to one mile to allow for retrieval of any legally killed elk in portions of Game Management Units 5B North and 5B South, which occur on the Coconino National Forest. This change would affect approximately 355,000 acres. All rules for motorized big game retrieval would apply, including:

- Only one vehicle may be used to retrieve the elk
- Motor vehicle prohibitions in Congressionally designated Wilderness or other areas posted as a Forest Closure Order still apply
- Off-road driving for elk retrieval must not result in resource damage (e.g. excessively deep tire ruts; driving through wetlands; damage to fences, gates, etc.)
- The most direct route shall be used to and from the elk during elk retrieval operations

Implementation Strategy

Adaptive Management

The Coconino National Forest has employed all potential strategies including fixing errors on the Motor Vehicle Use Map, educating the public on the rules, monitoring, and reducing unauthorized motor vehicle use and impact through signage, closures, and enforcement. The Forest has used feedback from public input and monitoring efforts to adaptively manage multiple aspects of the program. Monitoring has been a priority to better understand the social and biological effects of the road management strategy and will continue to be a key part of management of motor vehicle use on the Forest.

The Forest will continue to use every tool available to implement motor vehicle management decisions to protect Forest resources while providing for sustainable motorized access and recreation opportunities. The implementation plan and monitoring reports, which describe and discuss the effectiveness of these efforts can be found on the Forest website here:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/coconino/landmanagement/projects/?cid=stelprdb5263010>

Phased Implementation

Camping corridors and road decommission activities cannot be implemented until they have been fully surveyed for archeological concerns and received appropriate clearances. This process is expensive and time consuming and will be completed as funding allows. Under a traditional National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) approach, no additional corridor designations would be made available until completion of this process. In an effort to make corridors available to the public as soon as possible, the Coconino National Forest proposes a phased approach to implementation:

- Upon finalization of the decision, corridors and decommission activities that have gone through complete survey and consultation would be implemented immediately.
- The Forest archeologists will complete surveys and clearances for the remaining corridors and roads as time and resources are made available by the Coconino National Forest leadership team. Upon completion, and given the surveys have determined that there would be no adverse effect to cultural resources, these corridors would be added to the designated open road system and displayed on the annually published Motor Vehicle Use Map.

The Forest recognizes the potential challenges of this approach – namely, that camping corridors may change within the first few years of the decision. However, the Forest used this same method with the 2011 decision and has found it to be effective.

Forest Plan Consistency

The Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, approved in 1987 and as amended through the 2011 Travel Management EIS decision and other amendments, has been reviewed in relation to this project. The project is consistent with the desired conditions, standards, and guidelines contained in the forest plan for relevant resource areas and uses, including soils and watersheds, nonnative invasive species, air quality, cultural resources, recreation and scenery, traditional and cultural uses, livestock grazing, and transportation and forest access. One Forest Plan amendment would be required to address the following language in the Standards and Guidelines section of the Forest Plan (p. 55):

General Crook National Historic Trail: Use of motorized vehicles, except vehicles designed to travel over-the-snow, such as snowmobiles, on any portion of the route not already designated and designed for general vehicle travel is prohibited.

The General Crook National Historic Trail currently overlaps dozens of system roads, the large majority of which are not designated for public motor vehicle use. Over the last several years, the Forest has seen regular unauthorized motor vehicle use occurring on these routes, such as in the Corduroy Wash area and surrounding locations. To address this issue of ongoing unauthorized motor vehicle use, the proposal includes adding designation of a number of the most heavily used routes that cross the General Crook National Historic Trail, so that other routes that cross the trail and contribute to water quality and wildlife degradation can be effectively closed and enforced. Through this strategy, the Forest would be providing for additional motorized access and motorized dispersed camping opportunity in this heavily used area, while effectively closing roads in the most sensitive areas.

Decision Framework and Responsible Officials

The responsible officials for this project will be the Coconino National Forest Supervisor. Their decision will include:

- whether to authorize the changes to camping corridors, route designations, and phased implementation approach described in the proposed action;
- whether to implement any alternative to the proposed action that may be developed;
- what mitigation measures are needed;
- what monitoring is required; and
- whether there are significant effects of the proposed action that may require the development of an Environmental Impact Statement

Submission of Comments

While the Coconino National Forest has continuously solicited feedback on the motor vehicle rules, we want to take this opportunity to solicit your feedback on this specific proposal, which is identified via easily downloadable maps. To ensure that your comments are fully considered during the scoping phase of this project, **we request that you submit comments by July 31, 2016.** Due to the scope and complexity of the proposal, we understand that providing additional time may allow for you to provide more detailed input to inform the decision-making process. Detailed comments are the most helpful. We are providing for an extended scoping period for your input to allow you to spend time on the Forest to ground-truth the proposed changes during a time of year when access is not limited by snow or saturated road conditions. Written comments regarding this project may be sent via mail, fax, email, hand delivery, express delivery, or messenger service to:

Attn: Mike Dechter, Travel Management Project Leader
Coconino National Forest
1824 South Thompson St.

Flagstaff, AZ 86001

Email: comments-southwestern-coconino@fs.fed.us (please include “Coconino Travel Management Project” in the subject line)

Fax: 928-527-3620

This project is subject to comment pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subparts A and B. Only those who submit timely project-specific written comments during a public comment period are eligible to file an objection.

Individuals or representatives of an entity submitting comments must sign the comments or verify identity upon request. 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.

Table 1. Proposed motor vehicle designation changes to roads, trails, and areas on the Coconino National Forest

Current designation	Proposed designation	Mileage
Roads proposed for additional designation		
System road, not designated	Designated for “all vehicles”, year long	117.4
System road, not designated	Designated for “all vehicles”, seasonal	2.6
System road, not designated	Designated for “highway legal vehicles only”, year long	0.44
Non-system road (including decommissioned roads)	Designated for “all vehicles”, year long	15.3
Non-system road (including decommissioned roads)	Designated for “highway legal vehicles only”, year long	0.2
Roads proposed for changed designation		
Designated for “all vehicles”, year long	Designated trail, any vehicle	1.28
Designated for “all vehicles”, year long	Designated for “highway legal vehicles only”, year long	5.9
Designated for “highway legal vehicles only”, year long	Designated for “all vehicles”, year long	9.53
Roads proposed for decommission		
System road, not designated	Decommission, non-system road	6.2
Non-system road	Decommission, non-system road	<0.1
Roads proposed for designation removal (closure)		
Designated for “all vehicles”, year long	System road, not designated	26.4
Designated for “all vehicles”, seasonal	System road, not designated	1.8
300-foot motorized camping corridors proposed for designation changes		
Not designated	Designated 300-foot corridor, both sides of the road	74.3
Not designated	Designated 300-foot corridor, one side of the road	7.1

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Designated 300-foot corridor, both sides of road	Designated 300-foot corridor, one side of the road	13.2
Designated 300-foot corridor, one side of the road	Designated 300-foot corridor, both sides of road	0.4
Designated 300-foot corridor, both sides of the road	Not designated	20.3
Designated 300-foot corridor, one side of the road	Not designated	1.3
Motorized trails proposed for designation changes		
Non-system	Single track	0.76
Non-system	Motorized trail <62"	3.01