

Off-Highway Vehicle Report

June 2019

1. How does Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) access to forest roads affect recreational opportunities and related economic activity in forest communities?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service recognizes the significance of how access to National Forest System (NFS) lands affects economic activities on surrounding forest communities. National forests and grasslands are important drivers of economic activity, especially for the many communities located on or near public lands, contributing almost 216,000 jobs and more than \$17 billion to local economies.¹ More specifically, recreation visitor spending on national forests and grasslands contributes about \$11.2 billion to the U.S. economy and sustains more than 148,000 full- and part-time jobs. At the local level, scenic landscapes and recreational activities not only contribute to the tourism industry but also enhance the quality of life, employment opportunities, and property values of the communities in close proximity to NFS lands.

Agency land managers are balancing the need to provide motorized recreation opportunities and promote economic benefits to communities while preventing adverse environmental effects. There are more than 30 million Americans riding OHVs per year and 7 percent of all Forest visitors engaging in OHV, motorized trail, and snowmobile use. Each National Forest and Grassland must continue implementation of current travel management policies which will provide an economically viable, environmentally friendly, and socially sustainable forest transportation system.

As demand for motorized recreation continues, socioeconomic factors and visitor use preferences become increasingly important considerations in understanding and mitigating the effects of OHV use on public lands. Although OHV recreation offers economic value to local communities (where and when OHV use is popular), OHV use can also lead to conflicts among OHV users and other people seeking non-motorized forms of recreation. For example, National Forests experiencing over-crowding of designated OHV areas may inadvertently lead to unauthorized use in closed areas; and conflicts with other recreationists may discourage recreation altogether which can diminish public support for agency motorized programs. OHV use will continue to be an important aspect of how the agency manages NFS lands.

2. How many miles potentially could become available [for OHV access]?

The total number of road and trail miles currently available for OHV access is approximately 186,000 miles (60,000 trail miles and 126,000 maintenance level (ML) 2 road miles).

Roads are categorized into maintenance levels 1-5 based on services provided and maintenance level required. Because of their attributes, ML 2 roads are most logical to allow OHVs. They are designed for high clearance vehicles, typically have low traffic volumes, low speeds, and are not suitable for passenger cars. ML 2 roads comprise almost 55 percent (203,000 miles) of the total National Forest Road System mileage. Approximately 62 percent (126,000 miles) of ML 2 roadways are currently open for OHV use; additional miles currently open to high clearance

¹ FS National Analysis 2014 (NAICS) Version III FS 2017 FS 2017 (March 2019)



vehicles may be appropriate for OHV opportunities provided designations adhere to agency regulations found under the Travel Management Rule (36 C.F.R. 212).

3. Estimated budget needs for expanded access.

The Forest Service is committed to enhancing motorized recreation and OHV access on NFS lands to create quality recreational experiences. Estimated budget needs for expanded OHV access is dependent upon each National Forests' Land Management Plan (LMP). Expansion (or decommissioning) of roads and motorized trails are completed in subsequent travel management plans. Investment decisions to expand access for OHVs will balance resource values, promote safety, and minimize conflicts among all uses. Agency costs associated with expanded OHV access may include recreation, law enforcement, resource management, and other staff. The resources needed for these programs are provided in the FY 2020 U.S. Forest Service Budget Justification.²

4. Plans for opening new routes.

The Forest Service is committed to providing road and motorized trail systems that are sustainable, responsive to public needs for access and safety, environmentally sound, affordable, and efficient to manage. Plans to designate new OHV routes are determined at the local level in accordance with their Land Management Plan. The LMP establishes desired future conditions and objectives; identifies land suitability for various uses; and describes guidelines for resource protection. Site-specific, route-by-route motorized designations are determined from project level decisions based on resource values, safety, and minimization of conflicts among all uses of NFS lands. Public involvement including coordination with Federal, state, county, and Tribal governments is required for expansion of motorized recreation.

5. How other vehicles, such as all-terrain vehicles, could be utilized by wounded veterans and disabled citizens?

The Forest Service welcomes all people, including individuals with diverse abilities, to National Forests and Grasslands. We work closely with local governments, communities, partners, and individuals to enhance recreation access for all visitors to NFS lands.

Enormous opportunity currently exists for wounded veterans and disabled citizens to operate off-highway vehicles on NFS roads and trails. Approximately 38 percent of agency trail miles are designated for a variety of motorized use; this equates to 60,000 miles of motorized trails currently open for a variety of off-highway vehicles (ATV, motorcycle, and/or side-by-side utility recreation vehicles). There is additionally an estimated 126,000 miles of ML 2 roads currently open for OHV use. The Forest Service will continue to integrate accessibility into the full range of recreation opportunities along with a transportation system that is relevant and responsive to the needs of a changing population.

² <https://www.fs.fed.us/about-agency/budget-performance>



6. Public Involvement during Travel Analysis.

Forest Service regulations under Subpart A of the Travel Management Rule require the Agency to identify the minimum road system needed for safe and efficient travel, and for administration, utilization, and protection of NFS lands. This process is referred to as travel analysis which is an internal Forest Service process that does not result in a decision nor does it allocate NFS lands for specific purposes. Rather, it informs future project-level decisions related to a forest transportation system. The end product of travel analysis is a Travel Analysis Report (TAR) that follows a science-based framework with findings displayed as opportunities, benefits, risks, and recommendations. TARs are used to inform future management decisions for, and administration of, a National Forest transportation system.

The Forest Service is committed to the travel analysis process and desires transparency in sharing TARs with Congress, local governments, stakeholders, partners, and the public. Approximately 92 percent of National Forests currently provide Travel Analysis Reports, maps, and other transportation information on their respective forest websites. Forest Service staff are in the process of fixing links on approximately 8 percent of our websites and requesting the last few forests to upload their reports.

In addition, public engagement is critical to the land resource management planning process and project level planning for the designation of new routes.

Additional Background:

Agency Direction on Motorized Mixed-Use

Motorized mixed use (MMU) occurs when a National Forest System Road is designated for use by both highway-legal and non-highway-legal motor vehicles. Qualified engineers advise designation decisions by line officers after conducting road evaluations, assessing safety issues, and prescribing mitigation measures. MMU analysis may be simple documentation of engineering judgment or may include a complex engineering report that describes many factors related to mixing use among highway-legal vehicles and OHVs.

Operators of highway-legal motor vehicles on NFS roads are subject to state traffic law, including requirements for operator licensing. Off-highway vehicles that are licensed, certified, or registered under a state recreation fee or registration sticker program are not highway-legal motor vehicles because they are not licensed or certified under state law for general operation on all public roads in the state. When a line officer proposes to depart from state traffic law or change current travel management direction by authorizing motorized mixed use where it would otherwise be prohibited, that decision must be supported by documented engineering analysis conducted by a qualified engineer.

Motorized mixed use on roads designed, maintained, and operated for high-clearance vehicles may be appropriate where the objectives of minimizing use conflicts and promoting public safety can be met. Line officers consider mitigation of safety risks when allowing motorized mixed use on roads open to public travel, such as signs, speed controls, user education, modifications to road geometry, regulating the timing of commercial hauling, and other safety measures.