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U.S. forest officials curb ATVs

New maps will determine which paths are off-limits

By Steve Lipsher

Denver Post Staff Writer

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U.S. Forest Service Forest Tech Chris Foreman surveys a stretch of the Rocky Pitch Loop trail on his forest service ATV Thursday morning on the Uncompahgre Plateau. (Post special / William Woody)

The U.S. Forest Service has begun imposing travel restrictions on ATVs and other off-road vehicles nationally, ending their long-standing permission to go almost anywhere.

The move marks the end of the principle that forest lands are "open unless designated closed" to motor vehicles and instead establishes that they are "closed unless designated open."

"People would say, 'Well, look, there's a two-track there, and it's been there for a long time,'" said Paul Cruz, recreation staff officer for the Arapahoe National Forest. "That won't work anymore. Now, the burden is on the user to have a ... map and to follow it."

That means that off-road vehicles are allowed only on trails marked on new travel maps being drawn up for each national forest - in some cases excluding popular existing routes.

The growing popularity of off-road vehicles has proved to be a difficult trend to control for land managers, who say the growing network of illegal trails created by wayward motor vehicles is among their biggest problems.

By 2003, there were 14,000 miles of such "user-created" trails in the national forests.

Annual sales of all-terrain vehicles continue strongly after more than tripling since 1995, with more than 10 million four-wheelers and dirt bikes now registered.

Former Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth observed that if even 1 percent or 2 percent of ATV users go off route, "the cumulative impact is tremendous."

"You don't have to go far to see it. I could show you slide after slide," he said, "tire tracks running through wetlands, riparian areas churned into mud, banks collapsed and bleeding into streams ... and sensitive meadows turned into dust bowls."

For years, motorists have been able to travel off route as long as they weren't damaging the land, said Loren Paulson, recreation staff officer for the Grand Mesa National Forest.

"Obviously, ATVs sort of made things a little more difficult because they can go a lot more places," he said.

"You get the first couple of riders, and they just bend over the grass," Paulson said. "Someone else sees those tracks, and they follow them, and 50 vehicles later you have what appears to be a route. And how can you give a ticket to the 50th person?"

As staff members at each district and forest across the country craft motor-vehicle travel maps over the next two years, the routes become official - either open or closed - and violators can be ticketed.

One problem: The maps, which will be made available online, at ranger stations and in local outdoor-oriented businesses, are printed in black and white and don't show many landmarks, making navigation difficult.

The new federal travel rule was established in 2005 but so far has been applied only in a few national forests such as the Grand Mesa in western Colorado.

The changes take effect in each district as soon as the maps become available, though some aren't scheduled to be completed until 2010, possibly creating a patchwork of varying rules when trails cross boundary lines.

So far, the Forest Service has closed 2 million acres that have been open generally to cross-country travel.

The agency is ultimately seeking to restrict motor vehicles to designated routes on all 193 million acres, officials say.

In Colorado, where an estimated 877,000 people take ATV trips each year, only the Grand Mesa National Forest has completed its maps, in part because it had an existing travel-management plan in place.

To conservationists seeking environmental protection and quiet forests, the new rules offer relief from off-road vehicles running everywhere.

"Vehicles had essentially unregulated use of the national forests," said Andy Stahl, executive director of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. "For the most part, it's been free range for ATVs."

Even many four-wheeler groups acknowledge that specifically designated motor-vehicle routes are needed to stem abuse.

"All the people I've had contact with, by and large, think this is appropriate," said Jack Welch, president of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, an advocacy organization for motorized users.

Both sides, however, are concerned over which trails make the lists of official routes.

In some cases, fairly recent user-created routes are being included, and in others, traditional paths are being overlooked, according to ATV groups and conservationists.

On the Uncompahgre Plateau, land managers tried to compromise, allowing informal routes that "made sense" and that passed a lengthy criteria list, including wildlife and erosion concerns, Paulson said.

Meanwhile, some spurs, shortcuts and routes that ventured into environmentally sensitive areas have been closed.

"No one is going to be 100 percent happy," Paulson said. "A lot of the public was saying: 'I've driven this route for 30 years.' And the other side wanted them closed."

Staff writer Steve Lipsher can be reached at 970-513-9495 or slipsher@denverpost.com.

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