

Recreation Outdoors Coalition

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True Collaboration Needed for National Forest Travel Planning

The Forest Service's travel management planning process falls short of providing a balance of motor vehicle access with environmental protection.

Setting the Framework for Travel Management Planning: In November 2005, the Forest Service (FS) issued new travel management regulations that apply to all national forests in the country. Under the new regulations, each national forest must publish a map displaying the roads, trails, and areas where motor vehicles can travel. Once the map is published, motor vehicle travel off mapped routes or areas will be prohibited.

California has 4.99 million off-highway vehicle (OHV) users 16 years or older, accounting for almost 12 percent of the US total (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, February 2008). As California's population has grown, so too has the demand for outdoor recreation in the national forests. Motorized recreation is also important economically in many rural areas. There were 1,101,980 all terrain vehicles (ATVs) and OHV motorcycles registered in California in 2007, up 307 percent since 1997. Visitation at State Vehicular Recreation Areas was 4,222,386 in 2007, a 274% increase from 1997 (California Off-highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division, 2008).

The increase in use is also associated with environmental impacts when operators travel off-road or off-trail and create their own routes. Many national forests have large areas where cross-country OHV riding has been legal. This will end when routes and small riding areas are designated.

The Forest Service has a number of polices, regulations, and laws that require the Agency to coordinate with other federal, State, and local agencies as well as involve the public when proposed projects affect them. County governments may request cooperating agency status during the preparation of Forest Service environmental impact statements for travel management to ensure integration of county plans with those of the Forest Service (40 CFR1508.5).

The Forest Service travel management planning process in California has not promoted collaborative engagement with local jurisdictions or the public. Forest Service policies will significantly reduce motor vehicle access in the national forests. The following sections explain this further.

1. FS regional policy regarding motorized mixed use¹ in California² supersedes national FS policies and State traffic law. Regional policy will restrict non-highway legal vehicle travel on thousands of miles of existing national forest system (NFS) roads.

Background: Existing regional direction to all the Forest Supervisors in California allows motorized mixed use only on NFS roads currently maintained for high clearance vehicles where passenger car traffic is discouraged (letters dated 8/21/06, 6/20/07, 3/27/08 and 9/8/08). This equates to only maintenance level 2 (ML 2)³ roads being available for mixed use. These roads are generally short, dead end spur roads. The Regional Forester cites the California Vehicle Code as the reason for prohibiting non-highway legal OHVs on NFS passenger car roads⁴ with a maintenance level (ML) of 3, 4 or 5. There are 8,534 miles of ML 3, 4 and 5 roads in California, most of which are unpaved (FS Data, July 21, 2008). This represents 22 percent of all NFS miles in Region 5. Many of these roads have been safely used by OHVs for decades. Implementation of this direction will require trailering OHVs between ML 2 roads.

Some forests such as the Lassen National Forest have implicitly permitted OHV travel on all their unpaved roads, subject to officer discretion for enforcement. As a result, OHV use is well established on the Forest's maintenance level 2-4 roads and on unpaved county roads through the Forest.

Unpaved NFS roads (regardless of maintenance level) are not considered "highways" under the California Vehicle Code (CVC) 38001, which states: "For the purposes of this division, the term 'highway' does not include fire trails, logging roads, service roads regardless of surface composition, or other roughly graded trails and roads upon which vehicular travel by the public is permitted." CVC 38026 only applies to paved highways (per Tom Bernardo, *State Off-highway Motor Vehicle Division, 2008*).

The Deputy Commissioner of the California Highway Patrol (CHP) sent a clarifying letter to the R5 Regional Forester on December 19, 2007, which said in part:

"We are not familiar with all the ML 3 Forest Service roadways, but if they are gravel or other dirt or unpaved roads that have been operating as mixed use roadways for years, it is our belief these roads would fall under the "roughly graded trails and roads upon which vehicular travel by the public is permitted" portion of Section

¹ Motorized mixed use is a Forest Service term for authorizing travel by both highway legal and non-highway legal vehicles on the same NFS road.

² California is located within Region 5 or R5 of the Forest Service. It is known as the Pacific Southwest Region.

³ Maintenance levels are described in Exhibit 1.

⁴ The FS defines ML 3, 4, and 5 roads as being "passenger car roads" used by prudent drivers of standard passenger cars. ROC disagrees. Prudent drivers of standard passenger cars (with P rated tires) will almost always stay on ML 5 paved roads. Most unpaved ML 3 and 4 roads are too rough for standard passenger cars. Throughout this analysis, the terms "passenger car roads" and "ML 3-5 roads" mean the same.

38001 VC and would, therefore, be eligible for your mixed-use definition.”
(Underline added for emphasis.)

FS road maintenance levels are irrelevant to the CHP and the public. The most distinguishing characteristic of a road is its surface composition. Is it paved or not? Unpaved roads are exempt from the definition of a “highway” under the California Vehicle Code.

Conclusion: The Region’s policy regarding motorized mixed use on unpaved ML 3-5 roads does not conform with the California Vehicle Code. It was adopted without public involvement or interagency collaboration. Forest Supervisors in California continue to issue Notices of Intent (Klamath, Modoc, Shasta-Trinity National Forests) and Environmental Impact Statements (Eldorado and Tahoe National Forests) that say motorized mixed use is prohibited on ML 3, 4, and 5 roads under State traffic law.

Unless the Region’s policy is amended, motorized mixed use on ML 3, 4, and 5 roads will be limited to three miles or less under CVC 38026 and OHV riders must be licensed and have insurance. ROC drafted revised regional policy for motorized mixed use and forwarded it to FS staff in the Washington and regional offices for their consideration. We recommend it be adopted.

2. The Forest Service says public health and safety is their reason for restricting motorized mixed use on existing NFS passenger car roads. Region 5’s policy is not substantiated by the facts.

Background: In his September 8, 2008 letter of direction to the Forest Supervisors, R5 Regional Forester Randy Moore wrote:

“As an agency, we have recognized the need to conduct motorized mixed use analysis of our road system because we have identified a public health and safety concern when we mix highway legal vehicles such as passenger cars and log trucks, and non-highway legal vehicles such as all-terrain vehicles and off-highway motorcycles on the same roadway.”

The Regional Forester did not provide national forest road accident data to support his statement. Mixed use has safely occurred on ML 2-5 roads on the Lassen National Forest for decades without a single documented mixed use crash. There have been no mixed use crashes on the Shasta-Trinity NF. Since 1993, there have been four mixed use crashes documented on the Tahoe NF (DEIS Engineering Analysis, 2008).

The reference to logging trucks (or any commercial traffic) in the Regional Forester’s September 8, 2008 letter is improper. The Forest Service can and should impose temporary road closures for certain vehicle classes (i.e. non-highway legal vehicles) when commercial traffic is present, such as log haul during timber sales. This is an appropriate mitigation measure for public safety.

The data in Table 1 is from a traffic survey and an engineering analysis ROC did on a sample of the Lassen NF's unpaved ML 3 and 4 roads during the summer of 2005. Vehicle classes are displayed. Only 10% of the use on the Forest's "passenger car" roads was passenger cars.

Table 1: Vehicle Classes on ML 3-5 Roads, Lassen National Forest (ROC, 2005)

Highway Legal Vehicles					Non-highway Legal Vehicles		
<i>Car</i>	<i>Sport Utility Vehicle</i>	<i>Pick-up</i>	<i>Motorcycle</i>	TOTAL	<i>Dirt Bike</i>	<i>ATV/Quad</i>	TOTAL
10%	26%	47%	0%	83%	3%	14%	17%

The average speed ranged from 10-27 mph, on 75 miles of ML 3 and 4 roads observed during the summer of 2005, as determined by a prudent driver with a recording GPS unit. Average daily traffic, using a Federal Highway Administration recording formula, ranged from 5-16 vehicles per day. There is no reason to prohibit motorized mixed use on most unpaved roads in the Lassen National Forest.

ROC believes user education, "shared use" road signing, adequate road maintenance, good travel maps, and temporary closures of roads with commercial traffic will greatly enhance public safety on NFS passenger car roads (even though there have been few mixed use crashes without these measures). If concerns about risk develop later, they can be addressed for that particular road segment. Forest Supervisors should have the flexibility to manage public use on their road systems based on local demand, road conditions, and public safety.

Conclusion: Allow motorized mixed use on all unpaved NFS roads per the California Vehicle Code unless there is documented crash history or other safety concerns that can not be mitigated⁵. Involve the public in engineering analyses for mixed use when safety issues are raised. Seek collaborative solutions to mitigate the risk prior to prohibiting mixed use on a road.

3. The Forest Service is concerned about their liability if minors are allowed to operate their OHVs on NFS passenger car roads (ML 3, 4 and 5).

Background: Motorized mixed use on NFS roads also authorizes the operation of non-highway legal vehicles by minors. The State Vehicle Code has specific requirements for safety and liability when motor vehicles are operated by minors. In addition, most State and national OHV organizations actively promote and host safety programs for youth. Manufacturers also provide safety programs and riding tips for youth. Local OHV clubs sponsor their own safety programs for new riders. In short, safety is on everyone's radar screen.

Conclusion: The State and ROC share equal concern with the Forest Service over the safety and liability of minors driving non-highway legal vehicles on NFS or other public

⁵ Forest Service direction to meet Safety Standards requires an inventory of each accident by road and location or mile post. ROC has been unable to see any inventory.

roads. However, we believe State requirements for minors are sufficient. The Forest Service does not prohibit hiking, mountain biking, skiing, snow boarding, rock climbing, hunting, firearm use, driving with street legal vehicles or other recreational activities on the national forests. There are risks associated with all of these sports and, yes, some fatalities. The FS does not manage these risks by eliminating the activity or prohibiting youth under 18 or 16 years from participating.

ROC encourages the Forest Service to work with the California Highway Patrol and State OHMVR Division to determine if State safety requirements for minors need to be strengthened. The FS's pattern of issuing regional policy without collaboration eliminates the possibility of shared solutions.

4. The Forest Service has not engaged the counties in travel management planning. This lack of coordination will result in conflicting road management policies and foregone opportunities to have interconnected road systems that make sense to the public.

Background: There are miles of maintained, unpaved county roads within the national forests in northern California. OHV use is a long-standing accepted practice on many unpaved county roads.

In the past year, ROC has met with several County Boards and local user groups to share information and encourage their participation in the FS travel management planning process⁶. Many Boards were unaware of the Region's restrictive policy regarding motorized mixed use on NFS passenger car roads.

Conclusion: Many unpaved county roads link with NFS passenger car roads. Without integrated planning and agreement on road management strategies, there will be major inconsistencies in how each agency provides for OHV recreation. The riding public will be confused. The Forest Service should fulfill their legal obligation to coordinate with counties and develop seamless transportation plans.

5. Opportunities for the public to participate in FS travel management planning have been limited.

Background: During the inventory phase of travel management planning, the public was asked to provide information on the non-system routes⁷ they used. Maps of all of these routes were then prepared and the public was asked, again, which were the most important ones to designate. On some national forests (Lassen NF, Shasta-Trinity NF, Tahoe NF), over a thousand miles of unauthorized roads or OHV trails were inventoried on each forest. However, when their Notices of Intent (NOI) were issued, the Lassen NF

⁶ ROC has met with the Butte, Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Plumas, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Tehama and Trinity County Boards of Supervisors and/or their staff.

⁷ Non-system routes are called unauthorized routes in the 2005 Travel Management Rule. They are roads and motorized trails that are not part of a forest's official transportation system unless they become designated.

proposed to add only 37 miles of routes to the NFS system (3.2 percent of their inventory) and the Shasta-Trinity NF proposed to add 43 miles (3.5 percent of their inventory). In their draft Environmental Impact Statement, the Tahoe National Forest proposed to add only 70.3 miles or 5 percent of their inventory under their Preferred Alternative. The Klamath NF proposed to add 68 miles or 17 percent of their inventory.

Conclusion: FS proposals that close 83 to 97 percent of the inventoried, non-system routes on a forest do not reflect a reasonable balance between public access and environmental protection. ROC has submitted alternatives to both the Lassen and Shasta-Trinity NFs for their consideration in their Draft Environmental Impact Statements. Counties and local OHV users should be at the planning table with the FS to develop transportation alternatives that better reflect public desires.

6. The Forest Service entered into a Memorandum of Intent with the State Off-highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division to create a system of designated roads and trails for OHV use.

Background: On August 11, 2003, the Forest Service signed a Memorandum of Intent (MOI) with the State OHMVR Division and the State OHMVR Commission to inventory and designate routes for motor vehicle travel on the national forests in California. All routes were to be designated and motor vehicle use maps published by September 2008⁸. This partnership also provided \$12 million (to date) in State OHV grants for the Forest Service to inventory non-system routes and fund the planning process. A total of 10,257 miles⁹ of non-system routes were inventoried. However, few of these miles are proposed for designation, which was not the State's intent when they entered into the MOI.

Conclusion: The State OHMVR Division and OHMVR Commission funded an expensive 5-step planning process that eliminates thousands of miles of inventoried roads and trails on the national forests. If you combine this with the Region's motorized mixed use restrictions on 8,534 miles of passenger car roads (ML 3-5), riding opportunities for non-highway legal vehicles will be significantly reduced at a time when the demand has never been higher. This irony has resulted in a loss of public trust in travel management planning. Obligations for public involvement under the MOI should be fulfilled to design "smart" travel management alternatives.

Summary: The Forest Service's travel management planning process in California's national forests invites the participation of all those who care about the future of outdoor recreation and the environment. ROC believes change is needed in how motor vehicle travel is managed in the national forests. We all have a collective responsibility to cultivate the health of our public lands and community well being.

⁸ The Klamath and Shasta-Trinity National Forests have one additional year to complete their route designations.

⁹ This regional total can not be verified as individual forest data is different than the data ROC received from the Region.

Balanced solutions for travel management can be achieved when other agencies, county governments, and the public are invited to collaborate. Shared planning and decision-making also encourages shared actions to successfully implement the coming change. There are thousand of volunteers willing to help the Forest Service transition to their new travel management plans if they have ownership in the outcome.

Submitted by:

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Exhibit 1

Forest Service Maintenance Levels

FS-643 (8/99) Roads Analysis report and Forest Service Manual (FSM) and Forest Service Handbooks (FSH) define road maintenance levels (ML) as follows:

Level 1 – Closed for more than 1 year. Not subject to the Highway Safety Act.

Level 2 – High-clearance vehicles. Not subject to the Highway Safety Act.

Level 3 – Passenger vehicles, surface not smooth. User comfort and convenience are low priorities.

Level 4 – Passenger vehicles, smooth surface with a moderate degree of user comfort and convenience. Most roads are aggregate surfaced.

Level 5 – Passenger vehicles, dust free, possibly paved.