

A Balanced Travel Management Plan Will Protect Our National Forests



On June 25th the White Mountain Independent published two articles that touched on the ongoing process of developing a Travel Management Plan (TMP) for the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest (ASNF). Unfortunately these articles left the impression that there is widespread opposition to travel

management on our National Forests and that this opposition has become a partisan political issue. In reality public land conservation is a bi-partisan issue that has garnered strong support from both Republicans and Democrats since Republican President Theodore Roosevelt established our National Forest system over a hundred years ago.

Much of the criticism of the TMP process in the June 25th articles implied that travel management is an attempt by the Forest Service and conservation groups to limit access to our National Forests and that this effort is being opposed by Republicans. In reality, most of the rules governing the TMP process were developed under Republican administrations that were not very receptive to the concerns of many conservation groups. Nearly 40 years ago, the Executive Order allowing federal agencies to manage ORV use on public lands was issued by Republican President Richard Nixon. Two other Presidents, Democratic Jimmy Carter and Republican Ronald Reagan, issued Executive Orders, that made minor changes to Nixon's rule, but neither altered the underlying principle that federal agencies could manage ORV use on public lands "...to protect the resources of those lands, to promote the safety of all users of those lands, and to minimize conflicts among the various uses of those lands" (EO 11644).

The rules and regulations requiring TMPs on our National Forests were handed down by Republican President George W. Bush's administration. In 2005, Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth issued a Travel Management

Rule that required that all National Forests develop a TMP which would identify where motorized vehicles were allowed on National Forests. This Rule, which eliminates indiscriminate cross country travel by ORVs, was issued when Republicans controlled the White House and held substantial majorities in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate. The final TMP for the ASNF will likely be issued while a Democrat sits in the White House. But the authority behind that plan as well as much of its content was developed under Republican administrations. Far from being a partisan issue, travel management is an example of how different political parties can work together to protect our public lands for all to enjoy.

The claim in the June 25th article that the Forest Service has been “...uncooperative with disclosures and public meetings” is simply not true. The ASNF has been openly working on the TMP since 2005. Over the last five years they held dozens of public meetings to gather input on the issue, encouraged written comments, and invited all to participate in the process. While we haven't always agreed with the ASNF and will likely have points of disagreement with the final TMP, we do not believe that it is fair to vilify the organization for the way it has handled the process.

The need for restrictions on ORV use on our public lands is greater today than when President Nixon issued his Executive Order in 1972. Some forest visitors who use ORVs impinge on the experiences of the majority who want to enjoy quiet recreation activities. Inappropriate ORV use in our National Forests destroys watersheds, wildlife habitat, and forest vegetation that filters the air we breathe.

ORV users are a very small minority of forest visitors on the ASNF and other forests throughout the country. Over 80% of the people who visit our National Forests engage in quiet recreational activities such as hiking, camping, fishing, wildlife viewing, hunting, backpacking, etc. On the ASNF, less than 10% of forest visitors say they used ORVs while in the forest. A 2006 survey of Arizona hunters found that disruption caused by ORVs was among the top four “barriers to participating in hunting.” In fact, 54% of the hunters indicated that disruption caused by ORVs was a significant barrier to their participation in the sport.

Our National Forests provide many resources that are being destroyed by ORV use. ORV routes fragment wildlife habitat, lead to erosion and gullies that send sediment into our streams, and compact soils which reduces their ability to support native grasses and trees. ORV tires carry seeds of invasive species that compromise the quality of grazing for deer and elk, choke out native plants, and reduce the resiliency of the forest and its ability to react to climate change. There are literally hundreds of scientific studies that document significant impacts of forest roads and unrestrained motorized access on air and water quality, wildlife habitat, and integrity of archeological sites.

The facts are clear: Unrestricted ORV use causes lasting damage to our public lands and limits the ability of the majority of visitors to enjoy our National Forests. As development brings more people to our forests with inevitably larger and more powerful ORVs, our forests will suffer. A balanced and well-enforced TMP allows ORV use where appropriate and protects the quiet, pristine forests we value.

No one is trying to keep people out of the forest through Travel Management and those who ride ORVs should have a place to ride. It is likely that the final TMP for the ASNF will allow ORV travel on over 2,500 miles of roads and trails. However, motorized access must be managed to protect the public lands that are so critical to our water, air, and wildlife. The TMP will not keep anyone from camping, fishing, hiking, or hunting. Quite to the contrary—TMP ensures that we will have healthy forests that provide these cherished activities for generations to come.

