

OHV Use: Rising to the Management Challenge

Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth

ATV EXPO Industry Breakfast

Louisville, KY—October 14, 2004

It's a pleasure to be here, and I thank you for inviting me. I guess I might be the first Forest Service Chief to have the honor of attending an occasion like this. I think it shows how far we've come in the last 20 to 50 years: Much of our focus at the Forest Service has shifted to outdoor recreation, and a lot of the recreation on national forest land is now motorized.

Let me say one thing right off the bat: We believe that off-highway vehicles are a legitimate use in the right place. That includes many places on national forest land. But it's a use that's got to be managed if we want to keep it. That's what our proposed new rule for OHV use on national forest land is all about: Managing that use now to sustain it in the future. And if we want to sustain that use, then we've got to work together.

Serving OHV Users

Let me start by putting the issue into historical context. I first started working for the Forest Service back in the 1960s. Back then, our primary management focus in many places was timber. But we've always been dedicated to multiple-use management, so we managed for a lot more than just timber, including recreation opportunities. Of course, recreation wasn't much of a management priority in those days, at least not in most places.

That's because recreational use on national forest land was still relatively light. The user impacts and conflicts were minimal, so the way they were managed could also be minimal. You don't need to manage a use if it has no impact. For example, we don't need to manage blueberry picking much, but if almost every blueberry was picked every year or if people started fighting over the best blueberry sites, the situation would be different. We would have to manage it more.

The same goes for OHV use. There's a 1957 *National Geographic* feature on the Forest Service, and it shows a Forest Service employee on an old tote goat. We've long used OHVs for management, but in those days there wasn't much public OHV use.

That has changed. In recent decades, we've seen some tremendous improvements in OHV technology and tremendous growth in use. OHVs have become not only a great management tool, but also a recreational vehicle of choice. You know the figures better than I do, so you know we've seen an explosion of OHV use nationwide, including on national forest land.

We now get something like 11 or 12 million visits a year on national forest land where OHVs are either the primary use or a secondary use. About half of the users travel more than 50 miles just to have the opportunity to ride on national forest land, and about a third of them say they have no alternative—no other place to go.

So we have a tremendous obligation—and a great opportunity—to serve these folks. We see it as part of our mission, and I think we've fulfilled it in a number of ways:

- According to a survey we did this year, more than 200,000 miles of forest roads are open to OHV use. That's more than 60 percent of our entire road system.
- We've also got more than 36,000 miles of OHV trails, or about 28 percent of our total trail system open to OHV use. That includes some premier riding opportunities, like the Paiute Trail in Utah, a huge loop around most of the Fishlake National Forest. Some of you might be familiar with it.

Need for Better Management

We've got some great partnerships with user groups, and 99 percent of OHV users are responsible. They leave no lasting trace on the land. But if just 1 percent leave unacceptable damage, that's still an awful lot of damage: 1 percent of 11 or 12 million visits is 110 or 120,000 visits. If every one of those visits does damage, the cumulative impact is tremendous.

You don't have to go far to see it. I could show you slide after slide—tire tracks running through wetlands; riparian areas churned into mud; banks collapsed and bleeding into streams; ruts in trails so deep you can literally fall in; and sensitive meadows turned into dustbowls. Water quality deteriorates, soil erodes, and native plant communities decline, partly because invasive weeds are spread by tires going where they shouldn't be going.

Noise alone is a huge issue. Noisy machines can drive threatened, endangered, and sensitive species from the habitat they need to survive, like nesting trees for red-cockaded woodpecker here in Kentucky. Noise can also pit users against each other or users against homeowners; it's maybe the single biggest source of social conflict we have when it comes to outdoor recreation.

This isn't just a matter of a few user conflicts or a few user-created trails here and there—not anymore. Last year, we figure we had more than 14,000 miles of user-created trails on the National Forest System and more than 780,000 acres of user-created OHV use areas. That's a lot of unmanaged use, and it costs a lot to repair. It can lead to lasting damage.

Don't get me wrong. This isn't a problem for OHV users alone. Aside from the noise, other forms of recreation can cause similar damage—horseback riding, bike riding, even hiking or camping in sensitive places. The problem is unmanaged outdoor recreation in general, and it's only going to get worse unless we do something about it. By 2020, we'll have another 50 million Americans; by the next century, we'll more than double our population.

More people means more demand for outdoor recreation. Since 1946, the number of visitors to the national forests and grasslands has grown about 18 times. User impacts and conflicts have grown by the same order of magnitude—maybe more. That's why we've got to change the way we manage recreation. We're not the same nation anymore. The situation has changed, so we can't continue with the same kind of minimal management.

It goes back to what I was saying about blueberry picking: OHV use has reached critical mass. We can't just leave it alone anymore and hope it comes out all right. If we want that use to continue, we've got to better manage it.

A Better Way To Manage OHV Use

That's why we need to revise the way we manage motorized use. We recently proposed a rule for motorized use predicated on our belief that OHVs are a legitimate way to enjoy the national forests and grasslands when they are used responsibly in the right place. We want responsible use to continue, and we need this rule to ensure that it does. This rule will give us a nationally consistent approach to travel management. It will let us balance the public's enjoyment of OHVs with the best possible care of the land.

The proposed new rule would apply to national forests and grasslands that allow motorized use, which is most of them. It would require them to designate a system of roads, trails, and areas for motorized use by vehicle type and, if appropriate, by time of year. The rule would also require us to engage with state agencies, local governments, tribal governments, and user groups to identify additional routes. We issued the proposed rule in July, and the comment period closed on September 13. We received more than 70,000 comments, and we are currently analyzing them before drafting the final rule next year.

The rule itself won't open or close a single trail or a single acre to OHV use. Those decisions will all be made after the final rule comes out. They'll be made at the local level as we revise our local forest plans or travel management plans. Any decisions will be fully open to the public, and we invite you and everyone else to get engaged. If you care which trails or roads should be opened or closed, that's the time and place to get involved. Everyone will have the same chance to influence the outcome.

Our goal will be a *sustainable* system of routes and areas designated for motorized use. That doesn't necessarily mean closing every user-created trail or acre. If adding a user-created trail to the system would make it more sustainable by, say, completing a loop that riders want—and if the impacts are minimal—then that might make good sense. We will be carefully listening to local communities and user groups to identify the best locations for OHV trails and areas. That means taking our existing inventory and seeing what we need to add or subtract.

Common Ground for Partnership

To make it work, we're going to need help. Fortunately, I see a lot of common ground, because most OHV users don't come just to ride. They come for the same things other people do. More than half say they come to experience nature and more than 40 percent to see wildlife. A lot of them don't come primarily to ride at all, but rather to hunt, camp, fish, or hike. They don't want to see trashed landscapes or be disturbed by unwanted noise any more than anyone else does.

They're often willing to help, and I could show you slide after slide of volunteers going out on their OHVs to clean up trash, fix trails, repair damaged meadows, and so forth. We've got some great partnerships with user groups. Groups like the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council accept the need for designated roads, trails, and

areas, and they often help out by teaching and reminding riders to be responsible. They have a great education program for kids; and by reaching kids, they also reach the adults who shepherd them through the program.

Another great example is our partnership on the San Bernardino National Forest in California with the San Bernardino National Forest Association. If I'm not mistaken, they've gotten resources from Honda over the years, and one of their board members is a Honda employee. They have a volunteer program that brings together more than 150 people for all kinds of services. In fiscal 2000, for example, they completed over 19,000 miles of road and trail patrols. They also have an adopt-a-trail program that involves OHV clubs and corporate sponsors in trail maintenance. They provide safety information and training, maintain roads and trails, and close illegal trails and campsites.

We Need Your Help

You can help, too. You can get involved with local governments to help make sure that a good, constructive dialogue takes place on the right set of roads, trails, and areas for motorized use. Since noise is a big part of the problem for wildlife and other users, you can also help by putting more resources into developing quieter machines.

You can also be great partners for us through education. Industry has tremendous leverage through the power of advertising. I believe that advertising can do more to educate OHV users on responsible use than almost anything else. Through Tread Lightly!, we've got a good partnership framework for educating OHV users through advertising and other means. Some of you might be Tread Lightly! members, and I commend you for that. But the partnership only works if everyone sticks to the Tread Lightly! guidelines.

Here's part of one Tread Lightly! guideline: "Especially sensitive areas such as wetlands, spawning beds, riparian areas, and river banks should be avoided." Unfortunately, there have been ads showing ATVs splashing through a stream or churning through mud. At least one of these ads even shows the Tread Lightly! logo. Where that happens, it makes a mockery of our efforts to educate users. You can help by turning that around in the advertising industry.

Teaching Responsible OHV Use

In closing, I believe it's time we rose to the challenge of managing outdoor recreation. We can no longer afford not to. OHVs are a legitimate use on national forest land when they are used in the right way and in the right place, but the days are over when folks could just drive wherever they pleased. These days, there are just too many users having too much impact.

That's why we need a new rule governing OHV use. The new rule will lead to a sustainable system of roads, trails, and areas designated for motorized use, and everyone will have a fair say in determining where the routes and areas will be located.

Then it will be up to all of us, working in partnership, to sustain the system for future generations. You can help by sponsoring advertising only if it teaches responsible OHV use. You have that power; please use it wisely.