

editorial

Off-road riders are on notice

Forest rules requiring ORVs to remain on designated roads and trails will finally be enforced.

By The Denver Post Editorial Board

Article Last Updated: 08/31/2007 11:32:46 PM MDT

The U.S. Forest Service has begun imposing travel restrictions on off-road vehicles, and it's about time.

Rules requiring off-road vehicles to remain on designated roads and trails were proposed back in 2004 and took effect in 2005, but they haven't been universally enforced.

That's in part because it's hard for forest officials in good conscience to ticket some of these off-roaders. Even though they're on trails that are unmarked, and thus illegal, it's often hard to tell because the paths are so well-traveled.

Still, damage to public and private lands has gotten worse as a result, while forest officials have moved at a snail's pace to shut down so-called "ghost roads."

For outdoors enthusiasts, there's nothing like a hike or cross-country ski trek into the wilderness to experience the rich natural beauty of the back country. But dirt bikes, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles or other boisterous off-road vehicles have a way of marring an otherwise serene experience.

More disturbing than the noise is the physical damage done to the ecosystem by these illegal roads and trails. The devastation has become a real threat to our federal forests - with meadows churned into dust bowls, wetlands that serve as natural habitats for wildlife ruined, and riverbanks collapsed into waterways.

In the White River National Forest in Colorado, about 1,000 miles of illegal roads crisscross the terrain.

Under the new restrictions, off-road vehicles will be allowed only on trails marked on new travel maps being drawn up for each national forest. And in some cases they exclude popular existing routes.

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

As each district and forest across the country completes its motor-vehicle travel maps over the next few years, the routes will become official - either open or closed - and violators can be ticketed.

Users of off-road vehicles - including dune buggies and jazzed-up SUVs - make up only 5 percent of national forest visitors, but they do a disproportionate share of damage to the land and the wildlife. And their activities conflict with other forest users, such as hikers, hunters and horseback riders.

Bosworth has called "unmanaged recreation" one of the greatest threats to the health of national forests.

The downside of the new off-road plan is that some of the maps won't be done for several years. And the changes won't take effect until the maps are finished and ready for distribution.

Grand Mesa National Forest in western Colorado is the only forest in the state that has completed its maps. An estimated 877,000 ATV trips are made there each year.

Still, Denver Post reporter Steve Lipsher reported this week that even once the maps are made available online, at ranger stations and in local outdoor-sports shops, they might be difficult to read. They are being printed in black and white and don't show key landmarks, so navigation won't be easy.

But even without the maps, off-roaders should be put on notice. At the very least, forest service officials ought to start issuing verbal warnings to motorized off-road vehicle drivers heading into the woods.

All contents **Copyright 2007 The Denver Post** or other copyright holders. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed for any commercial purpose.