

TAKING STOCK OF TRAVEL PLANNING

By Josh Hicks, *The Wilderness Society*

Introduction

In late 1999 Wildlands CPR and The Wilderness Society, joined by more than 100 other conservation and recreation organizations, submitted a rule-making petition to the Forest Service asking them to overhaul their regulations for dirt bikes, ATVs and other off-road vehicles (ORVs). That petition was an important catalyst for the Forest Service's 2005 national Travel Management Rule (the Rule), requiring all national forests to limit ORVs to designated routes. When the Rule was published, it marked the beginning of the end of cross-country travel, the free-for-all, anything goes management paradigm where ORVs drive wherever they want. The promulgation of the Rule kick-started hundreds of local travel management planning processes on forests and districts across the country — processes that would determine which routes would be open for motorized travel and which would be closed.



One of the benefits of travel planning is the restriction of cross-country travel from nearly all national forest lands. Photo by Dan Funsch.

Since the 2005 rule was published, hundreds of travel planning processes have come and gone, with some still in play. We've had both successes and setbacks in our advocacy efforts. As a result of the travel planning process (with at least 20 decisions still to come), the Forest Service largely ended cross-country travel, thereby bringing new protection to tens of millions of acres. At this point in time, the Forest Service has declined to add thousands of miles of unauthorized, user-created routes to the system, far outweighing the smaller number of such routes that they did add as formal system routes as a result of this process.

It's important, however, that as we celebrate our successes, we take into account some difficult truths. One of these truths is that those unauthorized routes not designated during travel planning have not, of course, just disappeared. For the most part, they're still on the ground, still causing damage. Reclaiming these routes is no small task. Furthermore, the Forest Service still has about 373,000 miles of system roads — enough to travel from the earth to the moon and halfway back. They've told us to expect that the overall system may actually grow as the remaining final decisions come out.

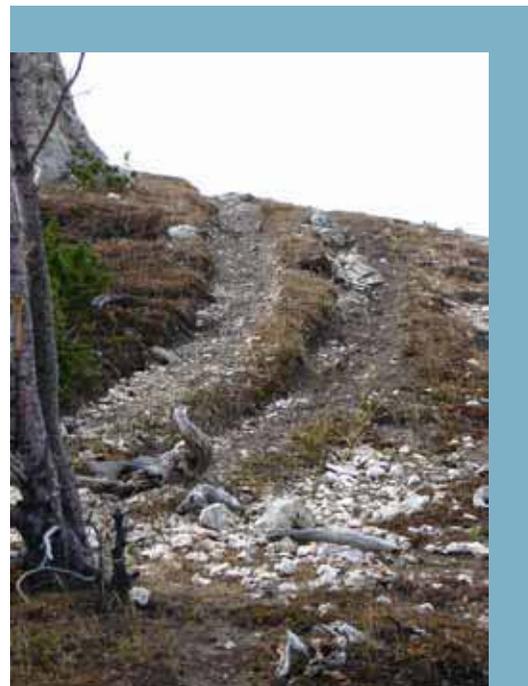
Outcomes Vary Widely

Let's move from the national perspective to a regional one and explore two examples to understand the importance of engaging in these processes. The Forest Service's Southwestern Region (AZ and NM) directed its forests to conduct travel analysis as the first step in travel planning. And while the travel analysis step has delayed the travel planning timeline in the southwest, it has led to better decisions and considerably smaller road systems than in other regions. For example, the Mountainair Ranger District on the Cibola NF in New Mexico proposed to reduce its road system from 471 miles to 178 miles, a 62% reduction, in the revised draft plan. Their Envi-

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ronmental Assessment used a route density calculation (as opposed to road density) that takes into consideration all trails as well as roads. This route density assessment offers a more accurate account of the impacts that the transportation system is having on forest resources. Under the proposed action, route density would be reduced from 2.45 to 1.18 mi/mi². This new action would make the road system on the Cibola much less ecologically impacting to wildlife. Numerous peer-reviewed studies find that road densities above 1 mi/mi² are problematic for many different species of wildlife.

At the other end of the spectrum is California. For years we unsuccessfully urged the Regional Forester and Forest Supervisors across the state to use the travel planning process to streamline the road system. Countless letters, meetings, and phone calls from conservation and recreation groups across the state as well as letters from members of Congress did not sway the Forest Service to change their approach. The regional office refused to conduct travel analysis as part of travel planning, opting instead to use the travel planning process primarily to add routes to the motorized transportation system. As such, forests across California have increased their transportation system by more than 800 miles. The travel plan decision for the Stanislaus NF, located on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, was one of the worst in the state. The Wilderness Society (TWS) and Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center (CSERC) worked together to submit extensive evidence of environmentally problematic routes that should not be designated for public motorized use. But, in the end, the Stanislaus opened 136 miles of unauthorized off-road



The Forest Service still has plenty of work to do to identify roads that are ripe for reclamation. Wildlands CPR photo.



Setting aside dedicated off-road use areas can help to avoid user conflicts and damage to sensitive areas. Photo by Sarah Peters.

trails and 67 miles of roads that were previously closed to the public and, in so doing, approved a massive network of roads and trails for ORV use. Even with a \$96 million backlog in road maintenance, the Stanislaus increased the mileage of open system routes by an additional 158 miles, bringing the total to 2,437 miles. Of particular concern is the fact that the travel management plan adds significant mileage of user-created ORV routes into inappropriate places like pristine roadless areas, wild and scenic river corridors, and rare and sensitive species habitat, such as for the California spotted owl, northern goshawk, Pacific fisher and western pond turtle. CSERC and TWS have filed a lawsuit and we are currently awaiting for the court to issue its decision.

While this isn't an isolated example, it also isn't the norm. Travel planning in most other regions falls somewhere between the Southwest and California examples – with the result largely focused on maintaining the massive motorized system footprint without making substantive changes to either add or reduce miles.

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Where do we go from here?

Most of the remaining travel planning processes will finish by the end of 2012; however, our work won't be done even after all of the formal requirements of the Rule have been met and all units have published their Motor Vehicle Use Maps (MVUMs). There are still numerous avenues through which activist engagement will be important.

First, travel planning will always be happening somewhere. A handful of slow moving units, like the Malheur NF in Oregon, will likely still be trying to comply with the Rule into 2013. In addition, the agency will be conducting some new analyses when Forest Service decisions are successfully appealed (like the San Juan NF's Rico-West Dolores travel plan in Colorado) or overturned in court (like the Sawtooth National Forests in Idaho) based on challenges from either side. Finally, ORV clubs will continue to press the agency to provide more riding opportunities or to seek access to routes that were not designated in the first round of travel planning. Conservation Northwest, for example, recently won protections for the Colville NF in Washington by deflecting a proposal by the Forest Service to add user-created routes to the system as well as open roads to ORVs that were previously closed.

Another important opportunity for activist engagement involves the annual publication of the MVUMs. Each year, each forest is supposed to publish a new MVUM that reflects any changes to the system that occurred since the map was last published. It will be important for activists to watchdog annual MVUM revisions to ensure that routes are not added to the system without first undergoing analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. Conservationists are litigating this very issue on the Pike-San Isabel NF in Colorado.

A third opportunity for engagement is assisting the Forest Service with implementing the route and area decisions made during travel planning. Implementation activities include trailhead maintenance, installing signs and gates, reclaiming routes not designated for public motorized use, and constructing motorized trails. There is more work to do than the Forest Service has funding to accomplish. It will be important to engage with the Forest Service both to help prioritize work that is most important to your organization and, where possible, to partner with the agency to get the work done.

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*Go through the gate and around the corner to a more sustainable transportation system.
Wildlands CPR photo.*

The Forest Service does not have the resources to manage, or even adequately monitor, the massive motorized systems it designated through travel planning. Citizen monitoring that identifies where problems are occurring (e.g., erosion, newly blazed user-created routes, user-conflicts) and how the problems are evolving over time will be important. This data can be used to convince the agency to revisit designations made during travel planning. If the agency ignores you, it may be possible to use the data you've collected to file a petition for emergency closure.

Forests across the country will soon embark on a new type of transportation system analysis (unless your forest is one of the few exceptions where travel analysis is mostly complete) to assess their entire road system, whereas the process that is just now concluding focused on motorized recreation designations (for more details about the interrelationship of this process, see [The ABCs of Travel Planning](#); RIPorter 12.4). The new process entails an inter-disciplinary analysis wherein forests evaluate the environmental risk and social value of each road in the system. Based on this analysis, forests will make recommendations about which roads to keep and which to reclaim or store for future use. The process is supposed to conclude by September 30, 2015. One important way for activists to engage in this road assessment is to offer site-specific information to the agency that demonstrates a route's high environmental risks and/or low social value. This information could result in the agency recommending the route be reclaimed.

In most cases, forests did not address winter use as a part of travel planning. When the Forest Service does take on winter planning, it will offer an opportunity to protect the natural quiet from snowmobiles.

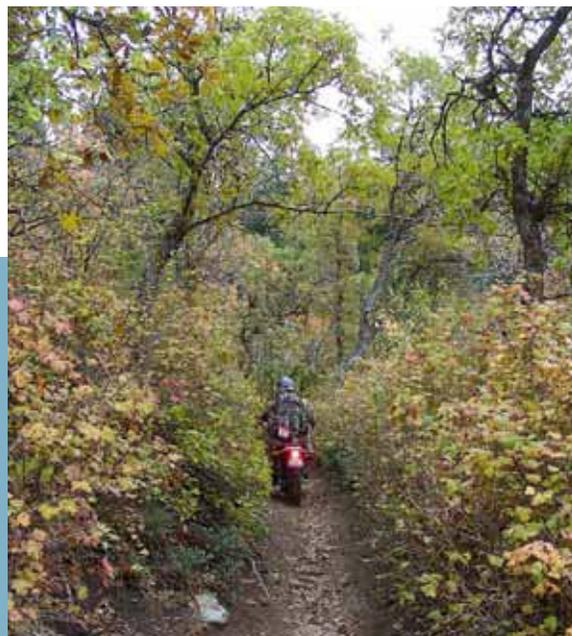
Since the Rule was published, the conservation, recreation and even hunting/angling communities have collectively engaged in a tremendous number of travel planning processes across the country. We've had both successes and setbacks throughout, and we've been fairly effective arguing against the addition of a high number of user-created routes to the formal system. Some forests have also reduced the total number of system roads open to motorized use. Activists will continue to have opportunities both to improve quiet recreation by advocating for better management of ORVs, and to right-size the road system to improve water quality and reconnect habitat well into the future. It will be crucial for the conservation community to be present and engaged in these efforts.

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Once reclaimed, forest roads can provide secure habitat for wildlife. A remote, motion-activated camera caught these elk using a reclaimed road on the Clearwater National Forest, ID. Wildlands CPR photo.

— See the case study of Mt Hood's travel plan on the following page —



Activists will need to stay engaged to ensure positive travel planning outcomes. Photo by Dan Funsch.

Lessons from Mt Hood's Plan

Located twenty miles east of the city of Portland, Oregon, the Mt. Hood National Forest is bounded on the north by the Columbia River Gorge and on the south by the Olallie Scenic Area, a high basin in the shadow of Mt. Jefferson. In between lies more than sixty miles of forested mountains, lakes and streams. The forest is habitat for several threatened or endangered fish species: Bull Trout, Middle Columbia River Steelhead Trout, Lower Columbia River Steelhead Trout, Chinook Salmon, Chum Salmon, and Coho Salmon, and serves as Portland's drinking water source.



Photo courtesy of Bark.

In 2007, when the Forest Service initiated travel planning, 38% of the acres and 100% of the roads in Mt. Hood National Forest were open to ORVs despite the fact that less than 1% of forest visitors came to ride ORVs. The Forest Service proposed to create up to nine ORV intensity zones in addition to ORV access to all forest roads. Citizens, led by the local conservation group called Bark, organized opposition. They conducted fieldwork, generated letters to the editor, guest columns and news articles, and hosted town meetings. The TWS National Forest Action Center and Wildlands CPR provided campaign, policy, GIS, financial, and legal support.

As a result, the Forest Service shifted course and signed a decision that created four ORV intensity areas and disallowed ORVs on forest roads. In a subsequent appeal resolution with Bark, the Forest Service removed one of the four ORV areas. The three remaining ORV zones are located near the periphery of the forest and are not negatively impacting wilderness or important habitat areas. This decision is a model that other activists and forests should consider. Rather than designating ORV routes throughout the entire forest, the Forest Service limited ORV route designations to defined zones. The result: cleaner water and healthier habitat, and a better balance between motorized and non-motorized recreation.



Photo courtesy of Bark.