

NEWS

TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE-FOREST SERVICE

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Tongass Eyes Motorized Recreation

TONGASS NATIONAL FOREST, Alaska – Many people explore the country’s largest national forest on foot while others prefer a more “motorized” approach. Off-highway vehicle enthusiasts, including fans of all terrain vehicles, want to responsibly enjoy public lands in their own way and Tongass National Forest land managers are making sure they can.

The Tongass is taking up OHV issues in light of the national regulation, announced by the Forest Service in November, concerning recreational motor vehicle use in national forests and grasslands.

“Affording people opportunities for first-rate outdoor recreation experiences is a critical part of our mission,” said Tongass National Forest Supervisor Forrest Cole. “We must balance the responsible use of OHVs for subsistence, hunting, fishing and just plain fun with protection of the resource.”

According to the Forest Service, a management policy was needed because use of OHVs has exploded over the past 30 years causing erosion, water degradation, habitat destruction, damage to cultural sites and conflicts between users. Nationwide, the number of users has climbed from about 5 million in 1972 to almost 36 million in 2000, which is a 600-percent increase.

The new regulations require national forests to designate routes for motorized use. Once these are identified, off-route travel on National Forest System lands will be prohibited. These regulations do not apply to snowmobiles, boats or aircraft and direct forest’s to complete motor vehicle road, trail and area designation decisions at the local level.

“OHV and other motorized vehicles are fun and exciting ways to experience national forests and we’ve seen dramatic increases in their popularity in the last decade,” said Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth. “Land managers will use the new rule to continue to work with motorized sports enthusiasts, conservationists, state and local officials and others to provide responsible motorized recreational experiences in national forests and grasslands for the long run.”

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Ranger districts across the Tongass are working hand in hand with local communities, interest groups and Tribal governments on OHV management policy and practices tailored to local conditions and needs.

“Overall, the Tongass does not have significant issues with the misuse of off-road vehicles,” said Yakutat District Ranger Tricia O’Connor, whose district is in the midst of producing an Access Travel Management Environmental Assessment. “However, Yakutat is particularly vulnerable because of its flat topography and open vegetation, which is not the norm on the rest of the Tongass. Most OHV use on the Tongass is on roads and trails, not cross country.”

The Sitka Ranger District also has faced some challenges with resource damage caused by unregulated OHV use in wetland areas.

“We have had problems with a few users causing resource damage,” said Sitka District Ranger Carol Goularte. “The new regulation specifies roads, trails and areas to be designated for OHV use. I believe when all is said and done we can satisfy local recreational users and protect our natural resources.”

Sitka is the first Tongass district to complete a 30-day public comment period for its ATM EA and will issue a decision sometime in the spring. Goularte said after reviewing public comments she is concerned some people may be confused about the new OHV policy.

“From the comments we received it seems there may be some misunderstanding concerning the national OHV rule and what it means locally,” she said. “There seems to be a perception that we are shutting down OHV use in Sitka which is just not the case. I want to assure everyone that we’re working hard to keep places open for them to ride.”

“I believe the majority of ATV riders here are very concerned and cautious about not impacting resources,” said Goularte. “They enjoy riding for recreation and subsistence purposes. I know many people have invested in landing craft type boats and ATVs and they love the activity. The Sitka ATM EA will allow for continued use on most of the roads and current available trails.”

“I know ATV riders have an interest in supplementary areas to ride. I plan to explore OHV opportunities in other areas outside roads and existing trails in a future environmental document,” Goularte added.

The Thorne Bay and Craig Ranger Districts are also working on a Prince of Wales Roads ATM Plan. All Tongass ranger districts will be addressing OHV use over the next few years.

People interested in participating in the Tongass OHV planning process should contact their local Forest Service Ranger District Office. A copy of the national rule can be found at www.fs.fed.us/recreation/programs/ohv/