

## **Travel Management Planning**

The Gila National Forest's Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and associated Record of Decision (ROD) is expected to be released in spring of 2013.

During the formal public comment period, over 2,000 comments were received from individuals, organizations, and elected officials. These comments are currently being analyzed to reach completion of the FEIS and ROD.

The Gila National Forest released its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) on motor vehicle use for Travel Management in accordance with the Forest Service publishing a new Travel Management Rule on November 9, 2005, that governs off-highway vehicles (OHV) and other motor vehicle use on national forests and grasslands. Publication of the Notice of Availability of the DEIS was published on January 7, 2011, in the Federal Register. This date marked the beginning of the 60-day comment period of the DEIS. The comment period continued through March 7, 2011.

During the informal public comment period, the forest hosted numerous public meetings, workshops, and open houses to listen and consider public feedback in the development of alternatives for the DEIS. District Rangers from the six Ranger District offices met with all four County Commissions (Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra) where forest system lands are located.

Forest managers understand that Travel Management is a controversial topic as it is a change from how the general public has historically used and accessed the national forests. When the final decision is made on the FEIS, the decision will reflect the forest's consideration of the numerous comments received.

- The new rule requires each national forest to designate roads, trails, and areas open to motor vehicles. Motor vehicles will continue to be a legitimate and appropriate way for people to enjoy the Forest; the forest will continue to provide motor vehicle access to national forest lands for activities widely enjoyed by the general public. These activities include camping, fishing, hunting, hiking, mountain biking, wildlife viewing, horseback riding, and driving for pleasure on designated roads and trails.
- With the release of the FEIS, the forest will be making changes as to how national forest system roads, motorized trails, and areas are available for use by motorized vehicles. Motorized travel will be allowed along the designated system of roads, trails, and areas as identified by the FEIS and the motor vehicle use map (MVUM).
- In the DEIS, the Forest presented a preferred alternative (Alternative G which combines elements from other alternatives to provide a mix of motorized and non-motorized opportunities).

One-thousand two-hundred eighty-one (1,281) miles of roads (out of 4,604 miles currently open) are proposed for closure under Preferred Alternative G. These proposed roads are mainly little spur roads, normally ½ to 1 mile in length.

With the proposed road closures under the preferred alternative, 3,323 miles of road would be open for public use. There would also be an increase in ATV trails from 16 miles to 182 miles.

- There are approximately 1,200 miles of roads on the forest that are currently closed or decommissioned, and don't show up on the maps. Decommissioned roads are those roads where the road bed has been restored (such as loosening of compacted soils, contouring to match surrounding landscape, seeding, etc.) to a natural state. Over the years, decisions have been made that led to these roads being identified as closed or decommissioned within our system. Under NEPA and the Travel Management Rule, the Forest is not required to revisit these previous decisions. That is why the approximately 1,200 miles of roads don't show up on maps since they are already closed or decommissioned.
- All accessible, closed roads will be available for emergency response organizations.
- A social and economic analysis in accordance with Forest Service direction was completed taking into consideration Counties social and economic information. The study area for the analysis included Catron, Grant, Hidalgo, and Sierra Counties that contain the vast majority of forest lands. Catron County contains the largest share of the forest with more than 2 million acres (62% of the four-county totals). The next highest forest acreage is in Grant County with 27% of the total; Sierra County at 11%; and Hidalgo County at 0.6%.
- On aging and disabled populations, there is no legal requirement to allow people with disabilities to use motor vehicles on roads or trails, and in areas that are closed to motor vehicle use. Restrictions on motor vehicle use that are applied consistently to everyone are not discriminatory. Generally, granting an exemption from designations for people with disabilities would not be consistent with the resource protection and other management objectives of designation decisions and would fundamentally alter the nature of the Forest Service's travel management program (29 U.S.C. 7904; 7 CFR 15e.103).
- For the enforcement of travel management regulations, time, outreach, and education are fundamental for implementing change. We do not expect to catch all violators, but that doesn't mean that all is lost. Like other offenses that occur on National Forests, we will continue to work on the problem, adapt where we can, but overall... do the best we can with the resources available. It is going to take time.

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